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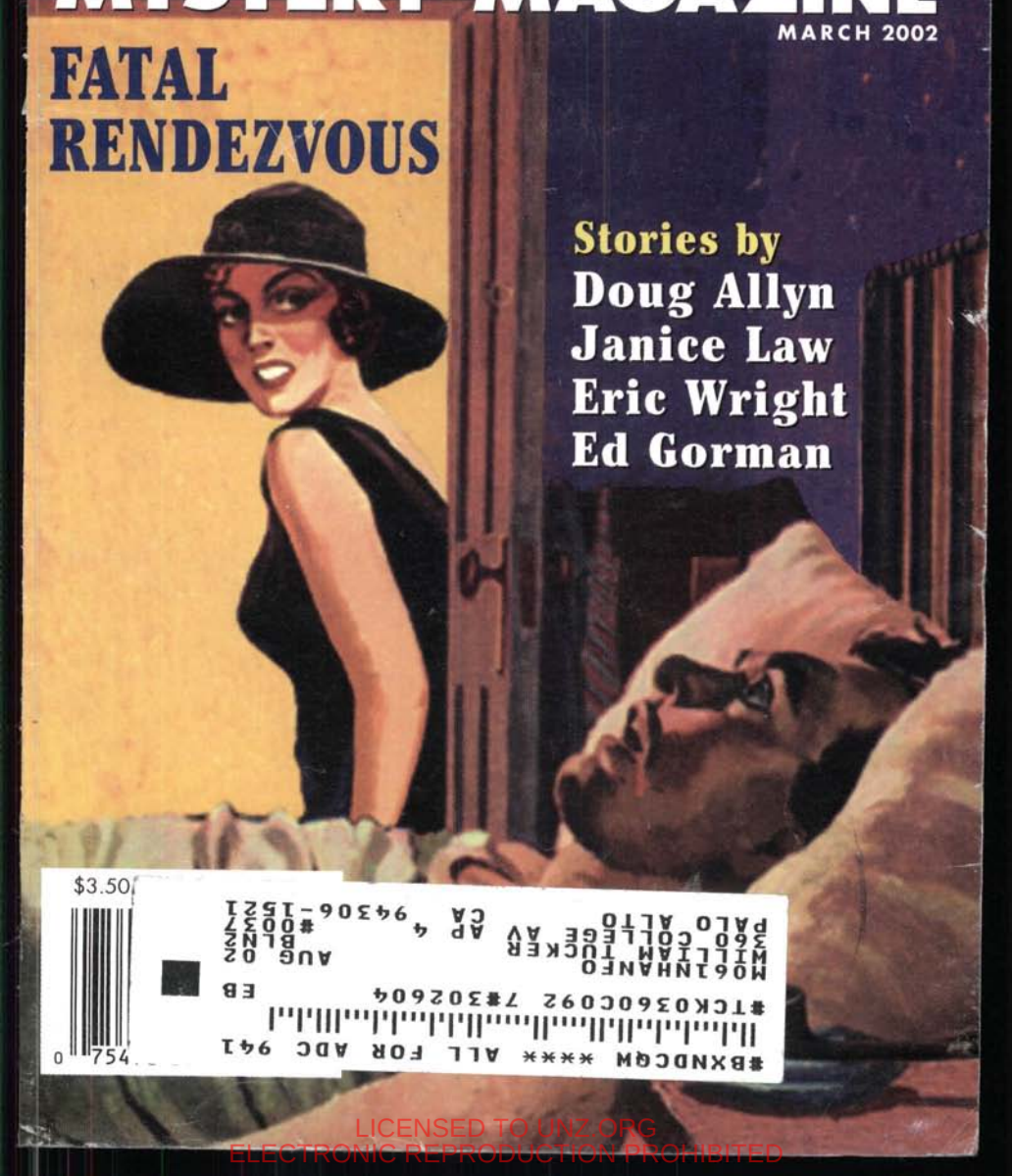

FATAL RENDEZVOUS

Stories by
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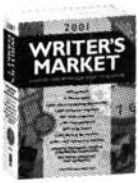

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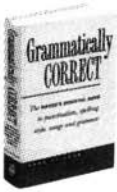

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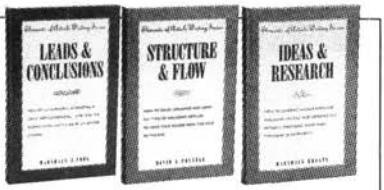

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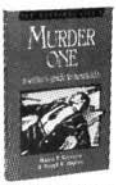

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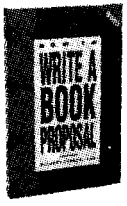

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CONTENTS

Fatal fantasy
Page 72

Race with Death
Page 130

Cover Illustration by
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Note: indicia on
page 143

FICTION

The Murder Ballads
BY DOUG ALLYN 4

Lions on the Lawn
BY JANICE LAW 36

Tower to Nowhere
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 48

Three's Company
BY EILEEN DEWHURST 63

Harmless Obsessions
BY DONALD OLSON 72

Mexican Gatsby
BY RAYMOND STEIBER 80

Caves of Ice
BY ERIC WRIGHT 93

Tiffany Blue
BY MELODIE JOHNSON HOWE 106

Melrose Rendezvous
BY WILLIAM BANKIER 118

Heartbreaker
BY ED GORMAN 130

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 45

POETRY

Victim
BY JESSICA PATRAW 105

So She Married the Earl of Fenlyn
BY HARRY HOPKINSON 129

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THE MURDER BALLADS

by Doug Allyn

Strumming his lute softly, Geoffry the Minstrel sauntered to the center of the great hall. And waited.

A striking figure of a man, he was tall and slender with a neatly trimmed blond beard. His tunic was raw silk, blood scarlet, trimmed with gold.

At the far end of the room his small band of musicians were in place, instruments tuned, watching for his signal. Still, Geoff made no move to begin. Waiting for his audience to notice him.

It took awhile. The revelers were happily hacking away at the carcass of the banquet's main course, a monstrous roast pig basted in beer with an apple in its mouth. The swine's carcass was scarcely recognizable now, and the drunken diners were equally disheveled, their fine clothing spattered with grease, spotted with wine.

At last, the host noticed the singer and shouted for silence. After waiting a moment longer for the din to settle, the minstrel struck a ringing chord on his lute.

"Good evening, milords, miladies, and those of you who fall some-

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where in-between. On behalf of our honored host, the Earl of McMahon,"—he paused for a round of applause and slurred Hear! Hear!s "—my fellow players and I bid you welcome to this glorious feast of St. Falstaff, patron saint of beer, beer, and more beer. And, of course, lusty, busty ladies. Of which we have a bouncy abundance tonight."

Again he paused for hooting and applause. One reveler dribbled wine down his wife's bosom and earned a clout upside the head for his troubles. Much laughter.

"But I see you grow impatient for a song," Geoff continued drily. "Since lust is obviously in the air, we'll sing a song of spring, the season when men's thoughts turn to what the ladies have been hoping for all winter. . . ." He scratched the lowest string of his lute with his thumbnail, imitating a woman's sensual moaning. More laughter and nudging.

"And so, let's think spring. Spring! The season of fertility and pheromones. Nature's very own . . . Viagra!"

The punchline drew a huge laugh. It always did. Mostly in sheer relief that despite his medieval garb and lute, Geoff's show wouldn't be a boring PBS riff on Greatest Hits of the Middle Ages.

With his audience primed and loosened up, Geoffry and his musicians broke into "Pastime With Good Company," a sprightly melody attributed to Henry VIII, though it might have been written by Henry Ford for all this lot cared.

Still, Geoff sang it with passion, caressing the lyrics with his clear tenor, startling the audience with the power and purity of his voice.

The roar of applause was genuine this time, true appreciation of the singer's art. But Geoff knew better than to milk it. Instead he called on Tiffany Miller to croon a bawdy Elizabethan ballad, "My Thing Is My Own."

Tiff's stunning high-fashion looks and low-cut Renaissance gown restored the mood of lusty revelry that made Geoff's group, Pearls B-4 Swine, minor stars on the corporate convention circuit.

Live the Legend. Dress up in Renaissance duds, get sloppy drunk, and grope your wives and girlfriends. To fat-cat yuppie

Doug Allyn is a talented professional musician as well as an accomplished writer. He performs regularly in Michigan clubs with his wife Eve and their rock band, and for the past few years the couple has also been performing "murder ballads" at a variety of venues. If the conclusion to this tale leads you to believe it may be the beginning of a series, you're not alone. But like us, you'll just have to wait and see. ✝

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business types, carousing in period costumes has both sex and snob appeal, a combination their fathers' Kiwanis Clubs can't match.

Bouncing the mood from lusty medieval to wry comic commentary, Geoffry the Minstrel and Pearls B-4 Swine kept the half-blasted Silicon Valley moguls in stitches for forty-plus minutes, no easy feat considering the condition of the crowd.

Late in the show, a drunken junior tycoon lurched toward the band, grabbing at Tiffany. As Tiff danced out of his grasp, Kirk Ohanian, the bearded, bear-sized drummer, took her place.

Waltzing the interloper back to his table, Kirk deftly parked him where he belonged, then gave him a stage kiss full on the mouth that brought a roar of laughter and applause as he capered back to the stage.

Geoff closed the show with Thomas Ravenscroft's "We Be Soldiers Three," urging the audience to join in on the chorus of "With never a penny of money . . . ," which the crowd found doubly hilarious since most of them had Bill Gates-type bucks.

With a dramatic bow, Geoffry the Minstrel politely thanked the sodden lords and ladies, then stalked out of the ballroom as boldly as he'd come.

Outside, he broke into a run, sprinting down the carpeted corridor to the hotel bar, banging through the double doors. The lounge was jammed, Saturday night singles hustling each other. College boys hitting on shopgirls, salesmen trying tired lines on hard-eyed divorcées.

"Cognac, no ice," Geoff ordered. "Do it twice."

"In a tankard or a ram's horn, milord?" the bartender asked, eyeing Geoff's jerkin and tights.

"Just gimme two snifters, pal," Geoff sighed, "and skip the comedy. I've had all the jokers I can handle for one night."

Reading Geoff's face, the bartender swallowed his next wisecrack. Even in costume, the minstrel's lanky frame looked crowbar-hard and his cool stare showed no humor at all.

Scanning the lounge, Geoff spotted an empty table in the corner and carried his drinks to it. By the time the other Pearls B-4 Swine players joined him, his first cognac was gone and the second was falling fast.

"Slow down, *amigo,*" Kirk Ohanian growled, lowering his bulk onto the chair beside Geoff. "Leave some hooch for the rest of us." Kirk, burly, dark, and heavyset, had a swooping Armenian moustache and a curly mop halfway to an Afro. He kicked out chairs for Tiffany Miller, the angelic blond vocalist, and Naomi Abrams, who played the Renaissance rebec, a pear-shaped fiddle.

A bit pear-shaped herself, with olive skin and a thick, raven-

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black mane, Naomi could have passed as Kirk's older sister. Or perhaps his brother in drag.

Tiffany was Naomi's opposite, slender as a willow and pale as buttermilk, with flowing, ash-blond tresses that tumbled like a waterfall to her narrow waist.

Neil Jannsen, the Pearls' agent, bustled in, spotted the group, and trotted to their table. In his tweed jacket, loafers, and sandy hair, Neil looked like a surfer who'd stumbled into the wrong century.

"Nice job, kids, management's ecstatic. Unfortunately, they paid us with a check so I won't have bucks until the banks open Monday. Anybody need a draw?"

"Can you front me a hundred?" Kirk asked. "I saw a neat bodhran in a pawn shop downtown."

"A lowdown what?" Neil said, slipping two fifties out of his money clip.

"A bodhran, not a lowdown, you friggin' Philistine," Kirk grinned, snatching the bills. "A traditional Irish drum."

"Buy an Irish drummer while you're at it," Tiffany griped. "You were dragging the tempo on my first solo, Kirk. Again."

"You mean you were rushing it again," Kirk shot back.

"Lighten up!" Geoff barked. "You're both wrong. I rushed the damned song. Wanted to get the hell out of there before they finished the pig and started on us."

"No way," Neil protested, "they loved you guys."

"They loved the pig, too, and look what happened to him," Geoff said, rising. "I'm going for a run to clear my head. I've got an early flight back to Motown."

"Are we rehearsing this week?" Tiffany asked.

Geoff nodded. "Wednesday, my place." He raised his last cognac, grimaced at the aroma, and lowered it again, untasted. "We'll polish up the tape I gave you last week, 'My Lady Doth Favor Love.'"

"Do you really need me for that?" Kirk asked. "My part ain't dick."

"Pearls B-4 Swine will be rehearsing Wednesday," Geoff said icily. "Last time I checked, you weren't an ex-Pearl. Yet."

Kirk grinned. "Like I said, I'll be there with bells on."

"I'd pay good cash money to see that," Naomi chortled. "Where you gonna hang 'em, big fella?"

"Hey, you guys are the band, right? The Pearls of . . . whatever the hell it is?" The swaying, sodden dancer from the banquet hall had followed them into the bar. Wearing a wine-stained caftan the size of a tent, he was clearly near his limit of booze, cholesterol, or both.

"They're the Pearls, I'm the manager," Neil said, rising to intercept the drunk. "Can I help you?"

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"Came for the lady," Caftan said, leering at Tiffany as he slumped into Neil's chair, pushing him aside. "Brought cash with me."

"I'm always happy to discuss bookings for the *group,*" Neil said pointedly, handing Caftan a card. "Call my office during business hours and—"

"Nah, I want her tonight," Caftan insisted. "You know, to play a private party."

"You heard the man," Kirk said, smiling dangerously. "Call him Monday."

"Nobody's talking to you, faggot," Caftan mumbled. "I already danced with you. I want a girl now. Hell, I'll take 'em both. Ten grand apiece, ladies, and all you gotta do—hey!"

Reaching across the table, Geoff hoisted the drunk up by his greasy collar. "Come on, sport, we're leaving. I'll walk you out."

"Is everything all right over there?" the bartender called.

"Just ducky," Geoff growled, marching the drunk toward the lounge door. "Wednesday," he yelled back to the group. "My place. And try being on time for a change!"

"What's eating him?" Tiffany asked.

"Not much." Kirk sniffed Geoff's cognac, then knocked it back in a single swallow. "His whole freakin' life, is all."

Sergeant Rosalia Morales eased the unmarked patrol car to a halt in front of the abandoned warehouse. Buzz Gillette glanced at her, arching his bushy eyebrows. "You sure this is the right address?"

"Geoff Prince leases the upper floor," she said, climbing out. "The block's scheduled for renovation next year. He's just ahead of the curve."

"Makes a helluva hideout," Gillette said, eyeing the rundown factories and storefronts as he eased his bulk out of the car.

They made an odd couple. Rosie, petite but sturdy, her ebony hair cut boyishly short in a Prince Val. Even her clothes were gender-neutral, dark slacks, blouse, and jacket. Black combat boots. Not designer boots. The real thing.

A hundred pounds heavier and a head taller, Buzz Gillette was linebacker-size. A star athlete in college, he was a bit soft around the middle now, reddish hair thinning out on top.

His face was equally red, with a drinker's permanent windburn. Sears sport coat, button-down shirt, clip-on tie.

Rosie rang the buzzer beside the battered freight door.

"Yeah?" A metallic voice echoed from the small speaker above the door.

"Police, Mr. Prince. We need to talk to you."

"About what?"

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"About five minutes, sir. Unless you'd rather talk at the station for five hours. Your choice."

A moment's hesitation, then the door buzzed open. "Come on up."

They rode a rattletrap freight elevator to a landing that hadn't seen paint since the Depression. Rosie held her badge up to the peephole in the metal door. Geoff Prince, the minstrel, swung it open.

Her first impression? Grad student. Trim blond beard, tousled hair, blue-gray eyes that matched his U of Detroit sweatpants and T-shirt. Barefoot.

"I'm Sergeant Morales, Mr. Prince, fifteenth squad, Detroit Metro Homicide out of Murphy Hall. Sergeant Gillette here's from Atlanta, Georgia. We understand you were in Atlanta recently?"

"We played there this past weekend and probably a dozen times before that. Why?"

"It's a bit complicated. Can we talk inside?"

"Mi casa, su casa," Geoff said, standing aside, waving them in. Rosie scanned his face for sarcasm, didn't see any. Or much of anything else. Wary eyes. Guarded.

His apartment was the opposite. Wide open. Candle sconces flickering high on the brick walls gave the cavernous loft an oddly medieval air. The only modern touch was floor-to-ceiling windows offering a spectacular view of the Detroit skyline across an abandoned railroad yard.

Furnishings? Ultra-basic. A futon couch, mix-and-match chairs, oaken bookshelves, and a cast-iron Franklin stove. And yet the barren room felt surprisingly cozy. A haven.

Candlelight reflected from polished hardwood floors, flickering across a row of guitars displayed above the bookcase.

"What can I do for you?" Geoff asked.

"You might be doing life if we don't like your answers," Gillette said, moving closer to Geoff, crowding him. "You have a record for assaulting a police officer, Prince. Why is that? Don't you like cops?"

"I've got no problem with cops," Geoff said, holding his ground. "Especially pretty ones. Jerks bother me, though."

"Tell us about the assault charge," Rosie said, waving at Gillette to back off.

"It was in Tijuana, maybe five years ago. Took a swing at a *federale.* Spent two years in a Mexican jail thinking it over."

"And you liked jail so much you're in a hurry to go back?" Gillette prodded.

"Nope. But I learned a few things there. About my rights and the games cops play. We're done dancin', Sergeant. Tell me what you want or hit the door."

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"Do you know any of these men?" Rosie said, handing Prince three snapshots.

Frowning, he looked them over. "Not offhand, but I meet a lot of people. This one needs vitamins. Bad."

"It's a morgue photo, wise-ass," Gillette said. "He's dead. And don't pretend you don't know these guys. We've got witnesses who place you with them."

"Maybe with this one," Geoff admitted, tapping the morgue snapshot. "Looks like a guy I met in the hotel bar in Atlanta Saturday night. He was healthier then."

"Why did you lie about knowing him?" Rosie asked.

"I don't *know* him, lady. From this picture, I can't even be sure it's the same guy. If it is, I bumped into him for about thirty seconds. Never caught his name. What did he die of?"

"You tell us," Gillette prodded. "You left the hotel bar with him around midnight. People saw you."

"I didn't leave with him," Geoff sighed, "I just walked him out the door. He went his way, I went mine."

"Which way was that?"

"I don't know where he went. I changed clothes and went for a run."

"Kind of late, wasn't it?" Rosie asked.

"I always run after a show. Helps blow off steam."

"Where did you run to?"

Geoff shook his head slowly. "You're gonna love this. I don't know."

"It was only three days ago," Gillette snorted. "Is your memory that bad?"

"My memory's okay, I just don't know Atlanta very well. When I left the hotel I think I headed west. I remember running along a river for a while, if that's any help."

"Which river?" Gillette prompted. "Peachtree? Proctor?"

"Don't have a clue. Maybe I could retrace the route for you, but at the time I really wasn't paying attention, you know?"

"I know you're digging yourself a hole, sport," Gillette said. "If this is your idea of an alibi—"

"Why would I need an alibi?" Prince flared. "What's this about?"

"Our witness said there was trouble between you and Cavanaugh," Rosie put in. "An argument. Tell us about that."

"Who's Cavanaugh?"

"Don't play dumb," Gillette snapped. "He's the guy in the picture."

"I told you I never got his name. And there was no argument. He was just a drunk. He hassled us a little during the show, then followed us into the lounge."

"What did Cavanaugh hassle you about?"

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"He apparently thought the girls in my band were for rent. They aren't."

"A drunk insulting your girlfriend must have made you pretty angry," Gillette said. "No wonder you popped him one in the mouth. Is that how it started?"

"Tiff and Naomi aren't girlfriends, they're musicians I work with. And I didn't pop Cavanaugh in the mouth or anyplace else. I just walked him out of the bar, end of story. In my business, handling drunks comes with the territory."

"What about the other two guys we showed you? Were they drunks, too?"

"I wouldn't know. Never saw either of them before."

"Wrong answer," Gillette said. "You saw one in Chicago last month and the other here in Detroit two months back. All three attended your show, then disappeared. The first two are still missing. Cavanaugh's body turned up because a farmer noticed his hogs acting strange."

Prince blinked. "Hogs?"

"Sure. The way hogs stink, you probably figured nobody'd notice a corpse turning ripe. But these were Georgia hogs, Prince. They rooted up the body. Shoulda buried him deeper."

"Let me get this straight, you figure I know something about this just because these guys were in the audience someplace I played? You've got to be kidding."

"Do these pictures look like we're joking, Mr. Prince?" Rosie asked.

"No, but just because people catch my show doesn't mean I know them. They're just faces in the crowd."

"Small crowds, though," Gillette said. "You play business conventions, right? Doing folk music for—"

"Renaissance music," Geoff corrected.

"Whatever. You play these little dinner gigs, guys get loaded and hit on your women. Must be frustrating."

"Compared to what? Conventions pay a lot better than coffeehouses. And what's that got to do with the three dead guys?"

"We didn't say the other two were dead," Gillette noted.

"Come on, you obviously think they are. What I don't see is why I'm a suspect. Because I talked to what's-his-name in a bar?"

"You were the last one to see Cavanaugh alive, Mr. Prince," Rosie said patiently. "Are you sure you never met the other two?"

"I don't party with these people, lady, I just sing for 'em. I showed Cavanaugh the door and that was it. Nothing else happened."

"Something must have," Morales said quietly. "You deposited thirty thousand in your investment account yesterday, Mr. Prince."

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"I don't know what you're talking about. I deposited my paycheck yesterday, but it was a long way from thirty grand."

"You also wired thirty thousand from First National of Atlanta into your investment account, Mr. Prince. Did you think wire deposits weren't traceable? Where did that money come from?"

"Ma'am, I've only got one bank account. It's got something like fifty grand in it and it's taken me four years to save that. Where do you get off nosing around in my bank account anyway? Don't you need a warrant for that?"

"We had one. With three missing millionaires, judges tend to be very cooperative. How do you explain that second account?"

"The only money I know about was my paycheck, lady."

"And how much was that?"

"The Pearls get ten grand for a dinner show, Neil takes fifteen percent off the top for booking us, the three players get fifteen hundred apiece, I get the rest. I deposited thirty-eight, kept two hundred back for walk-around money. Want to count it?"

"Ten grand for a few tunes?" Gillette snorted. "I played guitar a little in high school, probably still remember 'Louie Louie.' Here, I'll show you." He reached for one of the instruments on the wall.

"Leave the guitars alone!" Geoff snapped.

"Relax, sport, I know what I'm doing—"

"Touch that guitar and I'll break you in half, Gillette, cop or no cop."

"Whoa," Gillette said, his eyes lighting up, "you don't talk to police officers like that, boy. You shoulda learned that down in Mexico."

"Everybody chill out," Rosie said, stepping between them. "What's all the fuss over an old guitar, Mr. Prince?"

"It's not a guitar, it's an eighteenth-century *vihuela* in original condition. There aren't a dozen like it in the world."

"Looks like a junker to me," Gillette snorted. "Considerin' your reaction, maybe I should search it for contraband."

"Let it alone, Sergeant," Rosie ordered. "We aren't here to play guitars. I'm still waiting, Mr. Prince. Where did the thirty-thousand-dollar deposit come from?"

"I have no idea. It's not mine. Look, I'm sorry this Cavanaugh character got himself killed, but I don't know doodley about it and I'm due at a recording session in twenty minutes."

"Cancel it," Gillette growled. "You're coming with us."

"No, I'm not," Geoff said, backing away. "I've told you everything I know, which is exactly nothing. We're done."

Prince wasn't bluffing. Rosie could see it in his eyes. And for a moment she was in the alley behind the party store, yelling at the two punks to halt and drop their weapons. Knowing they wouldn't . . . She shook her head.

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"We're not going to arrest you, Mr. Prince," Rosie said. "Not today, anyway."

"Wait a minute," Gillette protested.

"I hate to be rude, but I have an appointment," Geoff said, opening the door. "Have a nice night. And the next time you want to see me? Try buying a ticket."

"We've got our man," Gillette said, easing down in the metal office chair. They were in Captain Cordell Bennett's office in the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice, Detroit P.D.'s Homicide/Interstate Crimes division.

"Prince has a record for violence, his alibi's a joke, he's holding part of the money, and he got jumpy as a cat when we questioned him," Gillette continued. "I wanted to haul him in and sweat him a little, but Sergeant Morales had other ideas."

"What's your take on him, Rosie?" Bennett asked, eyeing her over the bridge of his granny glasses. The spectacles and his shaved head gave Bennett a benign Buddha look that was deceptive. He'd risen through the ranks during Detroit's Murder City years. His stocky frame was cement-block solid. And his easy smile never reached his eyes.

"Buzz may be right," Rosie conceded. "Prince might be our guy. But he's also a street-smart ex-con with money. If we bust him now, he'll lawyer up and make bail before we finish processing his paperwork."

"Give me twenty minutes in a cage with him, I guarantee he'll be singin' like a bird," Gillette said quietly.

"It's a bit early in the game for that," Bennett shrugged. "How did Prince explain the thirty grand in his new account?"

"He couldn't," Gillette said. "Not without confessing."

"There's a lot more than thirty grand missing," Rosie countered. "The numbers aren't in on Cavanaugh yet, but Chicago tells me their victim was hit for nearly half a million and our vic lost about three hundred thousand, all done electronically, no tracks, no prints. The victims' PDAs are missing and—"

"PDA?" Gillette echoed.

"Personal Digital Assistant," Bennett explained. "Palm Pilots or whatever. Whoever did this probably used data from them to hack into the victim's bank accounts. He's either one hell of a computer ace or knows someone who is."

"I didn't see a computer at Prince's loft," Rosie said. "Some stereo gear, but no computer, no TV. The guy practically lives in the Dark Ages."

"We didn't search," Gillette said. "It could have been in another room."

"What room?" Rosie asked. "The place was wide open and the

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kind of electronic theft we're talking about would take state-of-the-art equipment."

Bennett sighed. "He must have it someplace. His new bank account was opened electronically, too. No signature, just a password. It looks like Prince opened it, but we can't link it directly to him."

"With fifty grand on hand, why would he bother to open a second account at all?" Rosie asked.

"I make Prince as a showboat," Gillette said. "He probably transferred the big bucks overseas, then plunked the thirty in his own account to rub our noses in it."

"I don't think so," Rosie said.

"Excuse me, were we at the same interview, Sergeant?" Gillette snapped. "Are you saying Prince is clean?"

"Nope," Rosie said, "but he's no fool, either. There was a moment . . . When you mentioned Cavanaugh's body being found on a farm, Prince reacted. Whether he's our guy or not, he knows something about this."

"Then why didn't he say so?"

"He's an ex-con, Gillette. He doesn't like cops. Or maybe he just doesn't like you. You tried to muscle him and it didn't fly. I want to try him again, Captain. On my own."

Bennett swiveled to face Gillette. "Any objection, Sergeant?"

Gillette had plenty of objections. But he swallowed them. He was a long way from Atlanta. "No problem, Captain. Your jurisdiction, your rules. Sergeant Morales and Prince did seem to . . . hit it off."

Bennett nodded. "Fair enough. If you think you can flip the guy, go for it, Morales. Just keep me posted."

"Yes, sir."

After Rosie left, Gillette realized Bennett was eyeing him. Smiling.

"What?"

"You think Sergeant Morales is a lightweight, don't you, Buzz? Some kind of affirmative-action bimbo?"

"No, I—"

"Don't blow smoke at me, Sergeant," Bennett said, waving off Gillette's objections. "It's a natural assumption for guys in our line of work. Good-looking minority female, must be boinkin' somebody to make promotion, right? Know how she got her shield?"

"No."

"She nailed two stickup guys in an alley off Dequinder. Warned 'em to drop their weapons, they didn't, she popped 'em. Two rounds apiece, right in the ticker. Both dead before they hit the ground. Cleanest shoot I've ever seen."

"Why tell me?"

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"Word to the wise and all that."

"Maybe you should tell Geoff Prince."

"No need. If he crosses Rosie, he'll find out soon enough."

Papa Doc's Cajun Bar-B-Q. Best baby-back ribs in East Detroit. Rosie stepped inside, scanning the diner. Fifties decor, chrome stools along a Formica counter, pink leatherette booths. Geoff Prince and Pearls B-4 Swine were easy to spot. Papa's was nearly full, and they were the only white faces in the place.

In person, Tiffany looked even lovelier than she did on the poster Rosie'd bought in a local head shop. Kirk and Naomi were laughing about something. Rosie didn't recognize the stranger at the table, a balding, older man in a business suit.

The next victim, perhaps?

Prince spotted Rosie, but if he was annoyed he hid it well. He stood, waving her over.

"Miss Morales, nice to see you. I take it you've got some follow-up questions for your . . . interview?"

Rosie nodded. "One or two."

"No problem, we're about done here. Kirk, why don't you guys take Mr. Cox back to the studio and show him around. I'll be along as soon as I can."

"You're a reporter?" Naomi asked. "Which magazine?"

"She's a freelancer," Geoff said hastily, "but I promised her the time, so . . . ? Get going, give us some privacy, okay?"

"An interview, right," Tiff snorted, winking at Rosie as she sidled past. "Watch yourself, sister. Geoff's a ladykiller."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Keep me in mind, too, *amiga,*" Kirk added, grinning. "Remember, drummers do it with rhythm."

"Out!" Geoff ordered. And then they were gone.

Leaving Rosie facing Geoff Prince. They eyed each other a moment in silence. Sizing up.

Wearing a gray Armani jacket over a Pistons T-shirt, Geoff looked semi-civilized, Rosie thought. A guy you could take home to mother. Assuming mom's life insurance was paid up.

Dark woman, Geoff thought. Dark hair, dark jacket and slacks. Dark, unreadable eyes. A mystery.

"Thanks for not frisking everybody," Geoff said as Rosie took a seat facing him. "The bald guy is Warren Cox from Cable Music. We're trying to cut a deal for a Renaissance music channel. Could mean airplay and some semi-serious bucks for the band. Assuming you don't hang me first. Can I order you something?"

"This isn't a social call, Mr. Prince."

"Pity," Geoff sighed. "I was hoping . . . never mind. What's up, Sergeant?"

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"You are. My partner thinks you killed Cavanaugh and the other two as well. He's looking to bury you."

"But you're not?"

"Not yet," Rosie said. "Do you mind?" She filched a French fry from his plate. "I missed lunch."

"Do you always steal food from guys you're trying to burn?"

"Only when I'm hungry. And I'm not trying to burn you, Mr. Prince. But I do think you know something about these killings."

"You're wrong."

"Am I? When Gillette mentioned that Cavanaugh's body was found on a farm, you winced. Why was that?"

Surprisingly, he smiled. A good smile. It erased years from his eyes. "Not just any farm," he said. "A hog farm."

"That's right, it was a hog farm. So what?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with your case."

"Tell me about it anyway."

"It's in a song," he said, watching her face.

"A dead body turning up on a hog farm is in a song?"

He nodded. "'The Ballad of Belle Gunness.' It's a murder ballad."

"A what?"

"A murder ballad. Do you know anything about the history of the minstrelsy, troubadours, any of that?"

"Just bits and pieces from a Humanities class. Fill me in."

"Minstrels have been around since ancient times. Probably prehistoric. Homer, the guy who wrote the *Iliad?* He was a minstrel."

"What's Homer got to do with hog farms?"

"I'm getting to that. In olden days, troubadours did more than just entertain people. They were like singing reporters, carrying the news from place to place. Some songs were about politics or battles. Some were about murders. Not 'I killed my baby and I'm feelin' so bad.' Actual murders. With names and places as factual as any news story. They're called murder ballads."

"And one of these . . . murder ballads? Is about a hog farm?"

"The Ballad of Belle Gunness," he said. "Belle was the most successful murderess in American history. La Porte, Indiana, nineteen-oh-eight. Belle ran ads in Chicago and Indianapolis papers: 'Woman of property desires to meet man of means. Object: matrimony.' She'd write hot love letters to the poor saps who answered and arrange for a get-acquainted visit. At Belle's hog farm."

"What happened?"

"Her pen pals brought cash to prove their honorable intentions. And they disappeared. We aren't even certain how many men Belle killed. Somewhere between twenty and forty-five."

"That's quite a gap. If they found the bodies—"

"But they didn't. Not exactly. Belle apparently got tired of burying stiffs, so she started feeding the bodies to her hogs. Forensic

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medicine in nineteen-oh-eight was pretty crude. The coroner's best guess was . . ." He spread his hands.

"Between twenty and forty-five?" Rosie whistled. "My God. What about the local law? Didn't they tumble to what was going on?"

"According to the ballad, Belle and the county sheriff were lovers. Maybe it's true. He resigned after she split."

"What happened to Belle?"

"Nothing. She got away clean. Probably lived happily ever after."

"No kidding? And there's a song about all this?"

"Accurate to the last detail. Just like the songs about Jesse James, Claude Dallas, and a hundred other killers you've never heard of. Murder ballads. I cut an album of them a few years ago."

"Really? And was the song about the lady with the hog farm on it?"

Geoff hesitated, then shrugged. "Yeah," he admitted, his eyes locking on hers. "As a matter of fact, it was."

"Are you nuts?" Bennett growled when Rosie phoned in. "Do you know how many hog farms there are around Chicago? Not to mention Detroit."

"We won't have to check them all, Captain," Rosie countered, "just the ones within easy driving distance. How many can that be?"

Thirty-six, as it happened. But they only had to check a dozen or so. The two missing bodies turned up early in the search. Captain Bennett was impressed. So was Buzz Gillette.

"You nailed him," Gillette grinned, pounding his fist into his palm. "The guy pointed us at the two missing victims. It's as good as a confession."

Rosie sighed. "I wish it were that simple. Prince didn't tell us about the hog farms, remember? We told him. And he didn't point us anywhere. The murder ballad did."

"But it's Prince's song!"

"No, it's not, he just recorded it. The ballad was actually written in nineteen ten. Pearls B-4 Swine released it on a CD five years ago. Thousands of people have heard it."

"Whoa up," Gillette said. "A guy sings about bodies buried on hog farms, argues with a guy who turns up dead on a hog farm, and you think it's all a coincidence?"

"I don't know what it is or what *he* is," Rosie snapped. "All we really know is that he gave us a break in this case and we're far from finished. We don't have the money yet—"

"Prince deposited thirty grand after the last killing!"

"Chump change," Bennett interjected. "The victims' accounts were hacked for nearly a million. Sergeant Morales is right. We can't connect Prince to the missing money or the first two victims. We don't have enough yet."

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"We know they were in his audience," Gillette pleaded. "And he had a beef with Cavanaugh."

"There were five people at Prince's table that night," Rosie said. "All of them know the murder ballad. Not to mention the people who own the CD."

"Seems to me you're working overtime to prove the guy's innocent, Morales," Gillette observed.

"Somebody has to. You decided he was guilty the second he told you to take your paws off his guitar."

"Hold it, you two," Bennett interjected. "We're all on the same side here. Do you still consider Prince a suspect, Sergeant Morales?"

"Absolutely. Top of the list."

"Then keep working him. He tipped us about the bodies, maybe he knows more."

"Damn straight he does," Gillette groused. "He knows every freakin' detail firsthand."

"If he does, I'll nail him," Rosie snapped. "Right now I'm more interested in the song. Prince says murder ballads are factual and it's proved out so far."

"So?" Bennett asked.

"So maybe Gillette's right and it's not a coincidence. Maybe we're dealing with a copycat here. Someone who's using the murder ballad, or the crime that inspired it, for a model."

"Like the guy who sang it, for instance?" Gillette said.

"Possibly, but not necessarily. I looked up the original case. Belle Gunness really did murder at least two dozen victims and probably a lot more, and made a bundle doing it. If some psycho wanted a role model, Belle would make a beaut."

"Seems like a long shot," Bennett mused, "but it's worth a look. If our guy is following the Gunness woman's blueprint, he should be easy to nail."

"Maybe not," Rosie said. "Belle never served a day in jail. And before she skipped, she planted evidence on one of her farmhands. She almost got him hanged."

"You sound like you admire her," Gillette commented.

"A woman feeding mail-order boyfriends to the hogs? What's not to like?" Rosie quipped. "I just hope we're better than the cops in nineteen-oh-eight. I'm going to see Prince, thank him for his help and see what else he knows. I'll be in touch."

"Know what I'm wonderin', Captain?" Gillette said after she'd gone.

"What's that?"

"If Prince is crooning her any tunes besides this so-called murder ballad. Like love songs, for instance."

"You think Morales is falling for the guy? No way."

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"You didn't see 'em together. It was like—electricity between them. You saying it's not possible?"

"No," Bennett said, thoughtfully cleaning his granny glasses. "I didn't say that."

"It's Sergeant Morales, Mr. Prince," Rosie said to the speaker over the warehouse door. "Can we talk a minute?"

"Do I need a lawyer?"

"Not today. This is more of a social call. A news update."

The street door buzzed open. Rosie found Geoff's apartment door ajar when she reached the landing after the rattletrap freight elevator ride. She could hear music from within, an ancient melody played on guitar. She started to knock, then didn't, unwilling to interrupt the song. Instead, she pushed the door open with her fingertips and tiptoed in.

Geoff Prince was sitting cross-legged on a cushion, cradling an antique guitar on his lap, his fingers caressing its strings as tenderly as a lover.

He didn't look up when she eased down on the divan across from him, and she didn't speak. She just listened. Let the melody wash over her, clearing her mind, carrying her back to gentler times.

When the song ended she was sorry. Neither of them spoke for a moment, lost in the spell of the melody.

"That was lovely," Rosie said at last. "What was it?"

"A Scottish border ballad, 'Song of the Outlaw Murray.' Seventeenth century. Or late fifteenth, depending on which historian you believe."

"A two-hundred-year difference?"

"With old anonymous songs you have to play detective, look for clues in the lyrics about who wrote it and when. There were two outlaws named Murray roughly a century apart. No one knows which of them the song's about. Maybe both."

"History repeating itself? Like the Ballad of Belle Gunness?"

"There was only one Belle Gunness."

"We're wondering if there's a brand-new one. We found the two missing victims, Mr. Prince. You were right, their bodies were buried on hog farms."

"I wasn't right, the ballad was. But I'm off the hook now, right?"

Rosie didn't reply, which was an answer of sorts.

"Damn," Geoff said softly. "I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you."

"You told us where to look for the bodies, Mr. Prince. The obvious inference is that you put them there or you know who did."

"If I'm involved, why would I tell you about the song?"

"People incriminate themselves every day, Mr. Prince. Don't you watch *Law & Order?*"

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"I don't watch much TV. Broke the habit down in Mexico. What do you want from me, Morales?"

"For openers I'd like to hear your version of that murder ballad. Local record stores don't have the CD."

"It's out of print now. I should have a copy of it, though." Laying his guitar carefully aside, he padded to the bookshelf music system. Riffled through a row of CDs, pulled one out, frowning as he eyed the jacket.

"Is something wrong?" Rosie asked, rising, going to him.

"Time," he said, showing her the CD. "We cut this when we were first starting out, playing frat parties and coffeehouses. Seems like a lifetime ago. I was still writing songs then. One of them's on the album, 'The Ballad of Charles Manson.'"

"Of the Manson family? Why did you write about him?"

"Charlie's a songwriter, too, did you know that? He seemed made to order for an album of murder ballads."

"And was the song a hit?"

"Not really. The only people who liked it were Goth kids and psychotics. Our next album sold better, bawdy Renaissance love ballads. College kids flipped for it. Moved forty thousand copies the first month. Not much by pop standards, but for a folk album it's hot stuff. That's what we were celebrating when we got jammed up down in Mexico."

"What actually happened down there?"

"Pure punk-ass stupidity. We played a show in L.A., went down to Tijuana afterward with some guys from the record company. All of us drunk as skunks, actin' up in some bar. The law came in, a cop grabbed my arm. I tried to pull free, he slapped me, and I swung. . . ."

Geoff shook his head slowly, remembering. "And in that instant my life changed. Forever. I'll never be the kid who sang on this CD again. That must sound crazy to you."

"No," Rosie said, remembering the alley, the wild eyes of the two punks. "Sometimes terrible things can happen in a heartbeat." Without thinking, she reached up and cupped his cheek with her palm. Their eyes met and held. And she felt her breathing go shallow. "What happened after you hit the cop?"

"They busted us. Leo was holding coke, and—"

"Leo?"

"Leo Neimi, my percussionist at the time. The trial took about ten minutes. We both went inside. And I'd really rather not talk about it."

"Then maybe you'd better play the song for me," she said, taking a deep breath and turning away.

He slipped the disk into the slot, programmed the player, then stalked off to the kitchen.

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Rosie picked up the CD case. In the jacket photo, Geoff looked strikingly different, smiling, boyish, green as grass.

He looked harder now. Seasoned. Still handsome, but with a dangerous edge. Honed by hard times.

Tiffany looked about twelve, Naomi's bouffant hairstyle was even wider than her bottom. Kirk Ohanian wasn't in the photo at all. A tall, pigtailed Viking holding a leather drum was scowling at the camera instead. Leo Neimi?

A hillbilly fiddle opened the ballad at a peppy pace before Geoff's voice came in.

"Belle Gunness was a hefty gal down Indiana way, weighed nigh as much as any hog, so the Hoosiers say . . ."

Geoff returned from the kitchen with two tulip glasses of white wine. Rosie accepted one, nodding her thanks, concentrating on the lyrics.

"What do you think?" he asked when it ended. "Top-forty stuff?"

"I expected it to be dark and grim. You played it for laughs."

"I played it the way it was written. Come on, a three-hundred-pound babe lures poor schmucks to her farm, steals their money, and feeds them to her pigs? In a weird way, it *is* funny."

"Not when you've seen the bodies," she said, sipping the wine. Tart and surprisingly good. "Nothing's funny about murder."

"Maybe it depends on who gets killed. In Mexico, my cellmate killed another con defending me. Beat him to death with a pipe. Maybe that was murder. Didn't seem like it at the time."

"It must have been tough for you down there."

"A skinny *gringo* kid with all those badass *hombres?* Yeah, it was hard. I made it through but I paid a pretty steep price."

"What price?"

"Everything," he said quietly. "In a place like that you shut your soul down. All I had was music. Sang songs to myself over and over again. They were my escape to other places, other times."

"Songs like the murder ballads?"

"Sometimes," Geoff admitted. "My cellmate liked them. I preferred Renaissance songs."

"Why?"

"Life was simpler then. We've got more gadgets now, but I'm not sure our lives are any better. Unless you think gangsta rap is a giant leap over Mozart."

"Maybe not," she smiled. "So you . . . try to live in the past?" She gestured at his barren loft.

"Nope, I live in the present like everybody else. I just try to keep it as simple as I can."

"No Internet connections?" she asked innocently.

"Neil, our manager, handles the Internet biz, I'm not on-line—

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damn. That was slick. For a minute I forgot why you came. That question was about the bank deposit, wasn't it?"

"You have thirty grand you can't explain, Mr. Prince."

"You're dead right. I can't. Because I don't know a damned thing about it!" The doorbell buzzed. Geoff stormed to the intercom and punched the talk button. "What!"

"Hey, it's me," Kirk Ohanian said, surprised at Prince's tone. "We're rehearsing tonight, right?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I forgot. Come on up." He buzzed the street door open. "You'll have to go," he said to Rosie. "No outsiders at rehearsals. And do me a favor. Keep up the reporter front, okay? With this royalties deal in the wind, the last thing I need is police trouble."

"You've got police trouble, like it or not, Mr. Prince."

"Not if you do your job right, lady. I'm no choirboy, but I haven't killed any millionaires lately."

"Okay, let's say I buy that. You're pure as the driven snow. Have you considered the implications?"

"What implications?"

"The evidence pointing toward you is no coincidence. Somebody knows enough about you to open a bank account in your name. Who? Who hates you enough to set you up?"

"Nobody, I hope," he said slowly. "There are articles about me and the band in fanzines and on the Internet. Maybe somebody collected the personal information there."

"I'm guessing it's someone closer. Give me some names, Geoff. Let me check them out. If you guess wrong, no harm, no foul."

"Damn," he said softly. "As much as I'd like to get myself out of this jackpot, I can't do that."

"But if they're innocent—"

"Come on, Rose, I don't run with angels. Turn anyone's life inside out, who knows what you'd find? Innocent people could get burned and it'd be my fault. Sorry, no sale."

"Have you got a death wish, Prince? Do you realize how much trouble you're in?"

"Sure. But Belle tried to frame her handyman, too. It all worked out in the end."

"You can't count on a happy ending just because the song has one."

"I'm not," he said simply. "I'm counting on you, Morales. I think in your heart you know I didn't do this."

They were very close now, too close for safety. And this time she didn't back away. His eyes were a lucent, icy blue, while hers were as dark as deep water. He gently touched her shoulders—there was a knock at the door.

"Open up," Kirk called.

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"Gotta go. I'll be in touch," Rosie said.

"I look forward to it. I hope," Geoff sighed, unlatching the door.

"Yo, the little reporter *chica* from Papa Doc's," Kirk boomed with a huge grin. "You doing up close and personal interviews now? I'm your guy."

"Actually, I was just leaving," Rosie said. "Nice to see you again, Mr.—"

"Ohanian. Kirk. Call me Cap'n Kirk if you like. C'mon, I'll see you down to your car."

"There's no need—"

"Sure there is, this is a bad neighborhood. If I'm not back in an hour, start without me," he yelled at Geoff as he yanked open the freight elevator's safety gate. "Just kidding," he added to Rosie, waving her into the cage. "Go ahead, Miss Reporter, ask me anything."

"Have you known Geoff long?"

Kirk nodded. "Forever. He's like my little brother."

"But I noticed you didn't play on the band's first CD."

"*The Murder Ballads?* No, that was the Pearl's original percussionist, Leo Neimi. Nice guy, but a major screwup. Oops, don't quote me on that, okay?"

"No problem. What happened to Leo Neimi?"

"Cocaine happened," Kirk said mildly. "After Leo and Geoff—" Kirk hesitated.

"It's all right, I already know about Mexico."

"Really? Geoff must like you a lot. He doesn't talk about that much," Kirk said, eyeing her curiously. "Anyway, by the time they got out, Leo was a total burnout, couldn't play at all. Geoff had to bag him. Funny thing, though . . ."

"What is?"

"I've been seeing Leo lately, some of the places we've played."

"Which places?"

"Atlanta, and a couple more before that. Chicago, maybe. Thing is, he didn't say hello. Just kinda stared at us. Like a freakin' zombie, which he pretty much is now. Ground floor, everybody out." He opened the lift gate with a flourish. "Watch your step, ladies and gents. On our left we have one of the meanest streets in Motown, while on our right we have . . . the same funky street. Where's your car, miss?"

"Just up the block," Rosie said. "I'm fine, really."

"You are indeed," Kirk agreed, offering his arm, "which is all the more reason I should walk you to your wheels."

As they approached the black Chevy with city plates, Kirk slowed, glancing from the car to Rosie.

"Whoa up, lady. That's not a press car, it's an unmarked patrol car, isn't it? What's going on? Is Geoff in some kind of trouble?"

"Should he be?"

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"No way," Kirk said positively. "He's one of the straightest dudes I've ever known. What's going on?"

"I can't really talk about it, but maybe you can clear a few things up for me."

"Like what?"

"Does Geoff have any enemies? This Leo Neimi, for instance. Was he angry about being fired?"

Kirk nodded."Mad as hell. Made some heavy threats about getting even, but he's so fried none of us took him seriously. Why? Is somebody threatening Geoff?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Could be Leo, or maybe the Goths. We've got a few looney fans, mostly Goth types. They're nuts about the Murder Ballads CD, especially the song Geoff wrote about Charles Manson. It's like an anthem for 'em. If the whole bunch of 'em wound up on the six o'clock news for whacking out movie stars and blaming it on the Beatles it wouldn't surprise me a bit."

"Which ones are the worst? Can you give me names?"

"I can do better than that," Kirk said, brightening. "We're playing the Scarborough Renaissance Fair this weekend outside Troy. The Goths will be there; maybe Leo will show, too. If I introduce you as a reporter doing an article about the band, Darth might talk to you."

"Darth?"

"The Goth head honcho. Mr. Personality."

"And you can arrange this?"

"Anything to help Geoff out. I'd be careful around Leo, though. He thinks Goths are plotting to steal his brain, and in that black outfit you could almost pass for a Goth yourself. Might want to add a couple tattoos, maybe get your nose pierced. I know a biker who works cheap. Want me to set you up?"

Rosie glanced up so sharply that Kirk burst out laughing.

"Gotcha," he chortled, shooting her with his forefinger. Kirk was still chuckling as she pulled away.

At the first stoplight Rosie tilted the rearview mirror to check her face. Could she really pass for a Goth? No way. Might be overdoing the hardcase career chick look a little, though. Or maybe not.

Geoff Prince liked her looks. She'd read it in his eyes. And that could be a problem.

Rosie often used her looks and personality to mellow out suspects, con them into cooperating. It was her edge.

Male detectives can bully perps. Rosie was too small to intimidate thugs, so she played them instead. Made nice, made them like her. Listened sympathetically while they bragged themselves into jail.

Prince was different, though. For the first time she wasn't sure

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who was playing whom. And she wasn't sure the game had anything to do with murdered businessmen.

According to the old ballad, Belle and the local sheriff had been lovers. Belle played him like a fish and left him twisting in the wind when she split. And that was the one thing Rosie was absolutely sure of. Nobody was going to hang her out to dry. Nobody.

Leaving their unmarked car in the lot with five thousand others, Rosie and Gillette paid their admission at the gate and followed the stream of tourists into the Scarborough Renaissance Fair. A gateway to the past. Sort of.

The entire municipal campground, which sprawled over fifty acres, had been temporarily converted into a reasonably realistic medieval village. Music and the shouts of barkers competed in a continual din. The very air had a sensual feel, flowers, incense, and exotic perfumes blending with the delicious aroma of roasting venison, turkey drumsticks, and the woodsmoke from a hundred open grills.

Artfully designed kiosks lined the unpaved streets, with vendors in Renaissance or medieval dress hawking everything from quarterstaffs to calligraphy.

A pudgy, red-robed cardinal in sandals was offering indulgences for three bucks a pop while twin witches in a nearby booth promised to brighten your future and curse your enemies for a fiver.

Screams erupted somewhere ahead in the crush of sightseers. People were shouting and shoving, trying to get out of the way. Gillette dropped into a crouch, sweeping his coat back, reaching for his weapon. . . .

The mob parted and a clown in a red Renaissance gown came sprinting past, shouting for help. His wig and dress were soaking wet and he was being chased by a jester on a Shetland pony laden with water buckets.

As the clown passed, the jester hurled a bucket of water in his general direction. Tourists screamed, ducking and dodging, then exploding into laughter. Confetti. They'd just been doused with a pail of confetti.

"Jesus H. Christ," Gillette growled, straightening his sport coat, "what kind of a nuthouse is this?"

"A profitable one, judging from this mob," Rosie said, grinning with relief. She'd dressed like a tourist today, blue peasant blouse, faded jeans, and sandals. Even a touch of lipstick.

Gillette was tieless, but in his navy blazer and brogans he might as well have been in uniform.

He'd noticed Rosie's softened image but made no comment. Working with women was risky business. No way to tell what'd

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tick 'em off. He'd been raised to stand up when a lady enters the room and call any female over twenty-one "ma'am." But a minority female who could shoot? The less said, the better.

She wouldn't be shooting anybody today. For her role as a reporter she was armed with a mini tape recorder and a notebook. No weapons, no need. Not with Gillette along for backup.

"How are we supposed to find Prince in this crush?" Gillette asked.

"The Pearls are performing on the . . . Verdant Stage," she said, checking her guidebook. "It's apparently halfway through the park. Just follow the crowd."

Easier said than done. In addition to the swarming sightseers, street performers constantly slowed their progress as tourists stopped to gawk and applaud. Jugglers, acrobats, a fire-eater. Eight royal guardsmen armed with pikes came marching past, followed by a towering, black-hooded executioner toting a five-foot broadsword. Dressed to kill.

The Verdant Stage was well named. The low platform was lavishly decorated with flowers and ferns, and even the roof was a floral tarpaulin stretched between two giant maples, giving the scene a marvelous woodland ambience.

Pearls B-4 Swine were in mid-performance, Tiff Miller singing "My Thing Is My Own" in her clarion soprano while Kirk capered about the stage, miming a rejected lover's disappointment.

"There's an alehouse with an observation deck just ahead," Gillette pointed out. "I can keep an eye on you from there without . . . cramping your style."

Rosie wondered if he was being sarcastic. Couldn't be sure, and didn't really care. "Go for it," she agreed, relieved to have Gillette out from underfoot. "No reason this has to be a grind. Have a cold one on me."

"Best advice I've heard since I got here. You take care now, little lady."

The big Georgian disappeared into the crush and Rosie did the same, worming her way through the audience to an empty wooden bench near the stage just as Tiff and Kirk finished their duet to rousing applause.

Bantering back and forth with some Canadian tourists, Kirk spotted Rosie first and waved a hello. And then Geoff glanced her way. Only for a moment. Just long enough for Rosie to realize she was in deep trouble.

She wasn't a rookie. She'd had flings, a couple of heavy-duty affairs, and she'd even fallen seriously in love once. And yet, seeing Geoff Prince onstage, hearing his voice . . . she felt her heart lifting. Like a goo-goo-eyed teenager.

Damn it! This could not happen! No way. Angrily, she kicked her

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emotions back into line. The rules were set in stone. Never get emotionally involved with suspects. It wrecks justice, warps your judgment, and it can get you killed quicker than a high dive off a skyscraper.

Her mental discipline worked. Almost. Halfway through the song she was her cool, collected self again. Angry and observant.

Most of the Pearls' audience here were tourists—luau shirts, baggy shorts, sunburns. A few others were obviously fans or groupies, togged out in Renaissance garb that mimicked the band's outfits, singing along with every song. By heart.

But there was also a rougher element clustered in one corner. Teens and twenty-somethings tattooed to the max, wearing black Levis and vests or trenchcoats, spiked hair, spiked dog collars, spiky attitudes. Pale as the vampires in *The Lost Boys.*

Goths. New Age dropouts, descended from '80s punk rockers and millennium metal-heads. Hells Angels minus the motorcycles.

Most Goth kids are just making a style statement, like bell-bottoms or letter sweaters. Others are serious trouble. Several high-school shooters were known Goths. Rosie's best guess about this bunch? Heavy-duty thugs. The real deal.

A towering Aryan type with an iron-pumper build, wearing a leather vest and kamikaze headband, was at the center of the Goth group. Lord of all he surveyed.

Familiar. Rosie was sure she'd seen him somewhere. Mug shots? A lineup? No, she would have remembered him from a lineup. The guy was nearly seven feet tall. Still, something about him seemed familiar. . . . It would come to her.

Fully in control now, her mood focused and fierce, she turned her attention back to the stage as the song was winding down. Forced herself to see Geoff Prince as just another skell. A suspect or a snitch.

It almost worked. Until the song slipped past her shields into a quiet corner of her heart. It was an ancient air about lost love, sung with such passion and longing that Rosie knew instinctively it was one of the melodies he'd repeated endlessly in prison. A love song. Not a murder ballad.

But the next tune was. Geoff and Tiffany sang "The Ballad of Belle Gunness" while Naomi fiddled and Kirk coaxed the crowd to join in on the chorus, turning a century-old serial killer into a sing-along joke.

The audience responded with glee, especially the Goths, and Rosie was glad Geoff had played the song. It reminded her that he was, after all, a performer. A showman. And murder was the reason she was here.

After the concert, Kirk sought her out while Geoff and the other

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Pearls chatted with the audience in the front row, signing autographs, selling CDs.

"Hey, if it isn't my favorite lady reporter. And looking especially fine, *chica*. How'd you like the show?"

"Very much," she said honestly.

"That last cryin' song got to you, didn't it?" Kirk grinned. "'For My Olden Love.' Geoff always devastates the ladies with that one. Wish I could sing like that. All I can do is tap a drum and hope it matches somebody's heartbeat. Ready to meet the Goths?"

"That's why I'm here."

"Word to the wise, then. These guys are pushy. Might give you some guff, but they never heard a compliment they didn't believe. How do you want me to introduce you? Rosie the reporter?"

"That's me. I even brought a notebook."

"Good. What rag?"

"Rag?"

"You know, what magazine? Better make it *Reader's Digest*. The Goths won't know it. They're so wired to the Web I doubt they read anything on paper bigger than a ticket stub."

"They don't look much like computer geeks."

"Dungeons and Dragons," Kirk said, darkening. "They play it on the Internet twenty-four/seven. It's like a religion with 'em. Darth, the tall guy in the center? He's got a computer setup NASA would kill for. Ask him about it. It'll break the ice. Darth, my man!" Kirk boomed, holding Rosie's hand, threading her through the circle of Goths around the giant. "How you doin'?"

"Anybody I can," the Goth leader said, tapping the drummer's fist with his own. The two men were a striking contrast in style, Kirk an amiable, bearded bear, dressed in the jerkin and leggings of a feudal serf, while Darth was a towering study in studded leather, his hair a spiked Mohawk, wearing a vest that displayed his heavily tattooed arms, studded wristbands, and fingerless gloves with studded knuckles.

"This is Rosie the reporter," Kirk said. "She's doin' a piece on us. Be nice, okay? We need the ink."

"No problem. What do you want to know?" Darth asked, looking her up and down. Like a side of beef. His eyes had an odd gleam, and it suddenly struck her that she didn't know him at all. Only his eyes seemed familiar. Charles Manson had eyes like Darth's. So did Hitler. Glittering. Messianic.

"Captain Kirk tells me you're fans of the murder ballads," she said, keeping her tone light and breathy.

"Absolutely." Darth nodded. "Best stuff Prince ever did. This medieval crap's better'n rap, but the old blood ballads, they had something real to say."

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Like what?" Rosie prompted. "What do the murder ballads say to you?"

"That life's tough and the strong eat the weak. That song they did at the end of their set, 'Belle Gunness'? That chick knew how to live."

"Is that song a particular favorite of yours?"

"Nah. The Charles Manson tune's more my style, but Charlie wound up in slam city. Belle slammed everybody else. Gotta love that. Maybe you and me should try some slammin', babe."

"Not today," Rosie said evenly. "Kirk mentioned that you and your friends are into Dungeons and Dragons—"

"They're not friends. I'm an alpha male, they're my family," Darth said, moving closer. "Hell, I won most of 'em."

"Won them?"

"In the Dungeons. You play with us, you play for real. Lose and you gotta give it up."

"Give what up?"

"Your body, babe. You belong to whoever wins you. I won a chick from Tokyo a few days ago. She's flyin' in Tuesday. For the next month she's all mine."

"Wow, no kidding? You play internationally? You must be a whiz with computers."

"Damn straight," Darth said smugly.

"But doesn't it take a lot of equipment?"

"I got all the equipment you need right here—"

"I meant the computers. What kind of rig do you use?"

"Pentium 4 CPU with a 256 meg RAM, a 20-gig hard disk . . ." He hesitated, blinking. "Whoa up. What do computers and Dungeons have to do with the Pearls? Are you checking them out? Or me and mine? What magazine did you say you were with?"

"Reader's Digest," Kirk put in hastily. "Gotta go. I promised Rosie I'd hook her up with Tiffany. Maybe later, big fella."

"Definitely." Darth stared after them as Kirk led Rosie away through the crowd. "Later. Definitely."

"Thanks," Rosie said, once they were clear of the Goth circle. "You really didn't have to do that. I was okay."

"I didn't do it for you, hon," Kirk said. "The Goths play rough and I'll be the one taking the heat if Darth makes you for a cop. Besides, while you were chatting him up I spotted Leo Neimi in the crowd doin' his Lurch imitation. Still want to talk to him?"

"You bet. Where is he?"

"He was at the back of the tent," Kirk said, looking around. "I don't see him now. Must've cleared out while I was saving your young butt."

"You didn't—"

"Yeah, right, I saved mine. Yours just happened to be along for

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the ride. Either way, Leo's in the wind. Shouldn't be hard to though. Do you know what he looks like?"

"Only from his picture on the CD jacket."

"That's Leo, big guy, hippie hairdo, eyes like pinwheels. Can't miss him," Kirk said. "You check the main drag, I'll scout behind the shops. If you spot him, better come get me to referee for you. Leo's more'n a little strange nowadays."

After Kirk disappeared into the crowd, Rosie scanned the tavern's observation deck, trying to signal Gillette that she was moving on. Couldn't see him clearly, the sun was in her eyes. But he waved back so she began drifting with the crowd, searching their faces for a cocaine-shattered ghost from Geoff's past.

It was a tough go. Sidling through the sea of milling tourists, Rosie figured her chances of finding Leo Neimi and Elvis were roughly equal. Too many faces, too much territory.

She glanced back to see if Gillette was following. Didn't spot him. But caught a glimpse of someone else. A tall figure in black leather, moving through the crowd toward her.

Darth? She didn't wait to find out. Picking up her pace, she threaded through the tourists. If she could put enough people between them—but it wasn't working. He was gaining on her, sightseers jumping out of his way. She stopped.

Hell, it wasn't Darth the alpha Goth at all. It was the hooded executioner she and Gillette had seen earlier, the giant with the five-foot sword. That's why the crowds were parting for him. He was one of the entertainers.

Shaking her head at her own fears, she scanned the mob for Gillette. Didn't see him. Odd. He should have caught up with her by now. . . .

The executioner was picking up speed, trotting. Heading directly for her. And for a fleeting instant she glimpsed his eyes through the eyeholes of the black leather hood. Caught the crazed gleam—

Sweet Jesus, it was Darth! Wearing a leather executioner's hood, cursing the crowd, roaring at them to stand aside. And raising his broadsword.

Was it just for show? Hell, no! The only things medieval about Darth were his weapon and the hood. The rest of him was strictly Goth. Two of his crew were with him, bulling through the crowd. Coming for her.

Instinctively she reached for her gun. Didn't have one. No sign of Gillette—damn!

Rosie bolted. Pushing her way through the crush, yelling for people to get out of the way. For a moment she thought she might get clear. Then somebody grabbed her arm.

A grinning tourist, holding her for the king's executioner. The idiot thought it was all a gag!

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Twisting free, Rosie stiff-armed the dimwit in the throat, vaulting over him as he stumbled to his knees, gagging. But she'd lost precious seconds. They were almost on her.

Bouncing off a hefty matron's sunburned shoulder, Rosie sprinted into a shop. Renaissance clothing, capes, gowns. She dodged between the displays, looking for a back door. And then the executioner was there, blocking her path, swinging his great broadsword!

Any doubts she had about Darth's intent vanished in that instant. As Rosie dove beneath a rack of cloaks the sword whistled past her head, missing her by inches, ripping into the row of period costumes.

Scrambling beneath the displays, Rosie tumbled out the entrance while Darth was freeing his blade. One of his goons was waiting for her, arms outstretched. The street was an arena now, tourists and gawkers forming a circle around the store to watch the performance.

The Goth blocking her path wasn't as big as Darth, but close enough. Six feet tall, barechested to show off his tattoos and buffed-up build. But he was no fighter, just a goon.

He grabbed at Rosie, a big mistake in hand-to-hand combat. Ducking under his reach, Rosie kicked his kneecap loose, slamming her elbow into the bridge of his nose as he fell, leaving him dazed and writhing in the square.

And the crowd applauded. Cheering her!

"Way cool," a teenybopper said. "That almost looked for real."

"It *is* real, you morons!" she roared. "This isn't an act! I'm a police officer, these men are trying to kill me! Get out of here and get help. Somebody call nine-one-one!"

But they only clapped louder, laughing and cheering.

"Nine-one-one," a bald guy chuckled, nudging his wife. "That's a good one. Hey, look out, lady, here they come!"

Darth the executioner and the other goon burst out of the shop as Rosie whirled to face them.

The second Goth was smaller than the first, wiry, with a purple cobra tattoo encircling his throat, its fanged mouth gaping on his shaved head. He even moved a bit like a cobra, edging warily away from Rosie. He'd seen what happened to his pal, wouldn't make the same mistake.

Basic combat strategy. They'd rush in from two sides. Cobra would grapple with her, keeping her busy long enough for Darth to take her out.

Licking her lips, Rosie estimated the distance to Cobra. If she could mix it up with him first, Darth wouldn't be able to swing—but Cobra obviously knew something about martial arts. He stayed just out of range. Waiting for Darth's signal.

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"For God's sake," Rosie shouted. "This is no show! Somebody help me!"

"Hey, no fair," the bald guy yelled. "She ain't got no sword! Somebody give the girl a sword."

"Booo! No fair!" The call echoed through the crowd. "Give her a sword. Give her a sword."

And incredibly, someone did. A dandy in Shakespearean tights stepped out of the crowd and gallantly tossed her his blade! A gleaming fencing foil.

Leaping high, Rosie snatched it out of the air before Darth could react. Plastic! The damned sword was a plastic replica! A freaking toy!

But maybe Darth and his pal didn't realize it yet.

Screaming like a banshee, Rosie charged the smaller Goth, slashing wildly at him with her plastic foil. He panicked, backing away, turning to run. But the cheering crowd wouldn't let him. They joined hands, blocking his path.

As Rosie lunged at Cobra, trying to kick him down, someone in the crowd shoved him back into the circle, slamming him into her. Reeling, she stumbled backward, struggling desperately to pull free, Cobra clawing at the sword as they went down.

And then Darth was standing over her, his sword raised—

"Drop it!" Gillette roared. "Right freakin' now! Do it!"

Too late! The blade whistled down as Gillette fired, grabbing Cobra's vest. Rosie had wrestled him around, using him as a shield.

Cobra screamed as the huge blade bit into his shoulder, and then he and Rosie went down under the pile as Darth toppled over on them.

Swinging her fists and elbows, Rosie fought to free herself from the bloody jumble. The terrified crowd stampeded, trampling each other, fleeing the gunfire and the play that had just exploded into reality.

A hand seized Rosie's shoulder but she squirmed away, hammering a backfist into—

Gillette's face! Groaning, he stumbled to his knees beside her, holding his nose with his free hand.

"Damn it! Chill out, Morales! I think you broke my freakin' nose. Get the hell out of the way, will ya?"

"I'm trying," Rosie panted, scooting backward on her butt, kicking her way clear of the muddle. "Where the hell were you?"

"Playin' tourist," Gillette snapped. "I lost you in the crowd, wound up tailing somebody in a blouse like yours. Didn't realize what was up until I heard you yelling. And you're welcome."

"Yeah, right," Rosie panted. "Thanks for saving my life, Gillette."

"No charge, Morales. Thanks for breaking my nose."

"You're welcome." And suddenly they were both grinning like

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idiots, shaking their heads. A close call. Very close.

"Help me," the Goth groaned, struggling to roll Darth's dead weight off him. "Somebody help me."

"Quit whinin', junior," Gillette growled. "I've cut myself worse shavin'. Is the other one dead?"

"Oh yeah," Rosie nodded, swallowing. She pressed a fingertip against Darth's carotid artery but there was really no need. The executioner's hood had a third bloody eyehole punched between the original two. "Dead. Definitely."

"Is he our guy?"

"I sure as hell hope so," she said.

"Congratulations, you two," Captain Bennett beamed. "While you were getting patched together in the emergency room, a search team turned over Darth Steiner's apartment. They found PDAs belonging to all three victims, along with doctored nude photos of Tiff Miller promising a wild night. Notes on his desk indicate that he used his monster computer rig to raid their bank accounts."

"What about Geoff Prince?" Rosie asked. "Did Darth plant that second bank account on him?"

"Don't know yet. The nerd squad tells me it may take a month to sort out the guy's hard drives. He customized most of his software and protected the data with high-tech firewalls. They don't know where he transferred the money yet, or how he set Prince up. Apparently Steiner's a computer genius. Or was, I should say. That was a hell of a shot you made, Sergeant Gillette. A bit risky, though, with so many people around."

"Some," Gillette admitted. "But Steiner was taller than most and I knelt to fire. If I'd missed, the bullet would have landed in Lake St. Clair. I hope."

"And I'd be minus my head," Rosie added.

"That'd be a shame," Gillette said, getting serious. "You've got a good head for police work, Morales. You were right. I wanted to bust Prince that first day because he ticked me off. But you figured he was innocent for . . . whatever reason. And you played the thing out. You saved me from making a dumb-ass mistake and I appreciate it."

"Before you two get all mushy on me, I need to walk Sergeant Gillette through his statement a few times before he meets with the shooting board," Bennett said. "It's just a formality, but you know the drill."

"Been there, done that," Rosie said, rising. "Can I grab a shower and change clothes before I talk to the board?"

"Go ahead," Bennett said, "I won't need you for a few hours. Oh, by the way, I canceled that APB you put on Leo Neimi."

"Why? He may have information we can use."

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"You'd need a medium to get it. Neimi's dead."

"Dead?" Rosie echoed. "How? When?"

"Drug overdose, eighteen months ago. Are you okay, Morales? You look a little pale."

Rosie didn't ring the buzzer at Prince's building. After stopping at her flat to pick up her weapon and a jacket, she climbed the fire escape, jimmied a window of the vacant loft next door, and let herself out into Prince's hallway.

The door was open. Music was playing within, a medieval melody. Live or a recording? She couldn't tell.

Flattening herself against the wall, she drew her weapon and peered around the doorframe. Couldn't see anything at first. Dusk was falling and no lights were on.

As her eyes adjusted she spotted Prince, sitting cross-legged in front of his huge bay window, battered guitar cradled in his lap. Staring out into the twilight as he played.

Stepping quietly inside, Rosie covered him, scanning the room.

"You're too late," Geoff said quietly. "He's gone. You don't need the gun. Unless you're going to shoot me."

"I might. I didn't know what I'd find here. Whether you'd be gone. Or maybe dead."

"If Kirk wanted to hurt me he would have done it a long time ago. He was my cellmate down in Mexico. The only two *gringos* in the place. With all those *hombres.*"

"You and Kirk. Not you and Leo?"

"Leo was holding coke the night we got busted. Went to a different prison. I never said he was my cellmate."

"You never warned me about Kirk, either. And you knew what he was. All along."

"No. I . . . wondered. But I didn't know and I still can't believe how far he went. I would have warned you if I'd known."

"Damn it, I asked you for names—"

"It wasn't that simple. I couldn't rat Kirk out on the off chance he might be guilty. I owe him my life."

"Because he killed somebody defending you in prison? What about the lives of the three businessmen he murdered?"

"I didn't *know* he was involved."

"You didn't want to know!"

"Maybe that's true," he admitted, glancing up at her. "Maybe I didn't want to believe it because I owed him. Big-time. And because he's my friend."

"If he was such a great friend, why did he plant that money on you?"

"I don't think he did. It was a mistake he wouldn't have made. Belle didn't set up a fall guy until she was ready to bail out. Are

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you sure Kirk made those deposits?"

"No," she admitted. "It could have been Darth. Probably was, in fact. And what about Darth? When did he and Kirk hook up?"

"I . . . knew they were friendly but didn't think much about it. Everybody likes Kirk. He's a charmer. Or didn't you notice?"

"I noticed. And you're right, he's a very likable guy. Which is one more reason you should have warned me."

"Yeah, I should have. I see that now. I'm sorry I didn't. I guess that doesn't matter much now, does it?"

She didn't answer. Which was an answer of sorts.

"So," he said. "What now? Am I still a suspect?"

"I don't know what you are. You definitely have some questions to answer."

"I don't know where he is. I'd tell you if I did."

"It's not my problem anymore. I'm going to ask to be transferred off this case."

"Why?"

"Don't be an idiot. You know why."

"Because of me, you mean?"

"No, because of me," she snapped. "I need to sort some things out about myself and this job. And maybe about you. But however it turns out, I doubt very much we'll be pals afterward. Or anything else."

"Maybe we'll be colleagues," Geoff said.

"Colleagues? What are you talking about?"

"I think we'll be talking again. About Kirk."

"But you said—"

"I don't know where he is, truly. But we'll be hearing from him again."

"How do you mean?"

"You met Kirk. He's bright and funny and glib. And an egomaniac. A natural born performer. But being a sideman wasn't enough. The world is his stage now. And he's a big star. Putting on the ultimate show."

"My God," she said. Getting it. Finally getting it. "The murder ballads. It's not a game. It's a performance."

"In that cell, music was my escape, it kept me sane. I think it did the opposite to Kirk. The murder ballads are five centuries of master plans for him. Who did what, how they got caught or got away with it. Belle is just one ballad. He'll use a different one next time."

"But . . . won't you be able to recognize it?"

"I don't know. We were in that cage a long time, Rose. We sang a lot of songs."

"How many?" She swallowed. "How many murder ballads are there?"

"Hundreds," Geoff said quietly. "He knows hundreds of them." ●

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LIONS ON THE LAWN

by Janice Law

Lions. Lions on the lawn. No, no, not lawn. Lions on grass, in grass. Is *grass* right? Leaping, jumping, hunting. Hunting is right, but another word, like plant, plant stalks, *stalking* lions on the lawn, on grass. Forgotten words. Could be worse, have the idea still, ideas. Awake? Yes, TV flickering:

". . . the lionesses are hungry. They move out across the veldt to the watering hole. . . ."

I sit up: living room, TV, low sun. Time. Time to move using the—what's its name? *Frame?* Frame for walking, *walker.* Yes, I'm awake again, which beats the alternative, and ideas are dropping into place, and words, some of them, enough of them, are there for use. But what's the time?

Right hand on useless left, turn watch: 4:25 P.M. Five minutes. Time to get up, to concentrate. Hard with one hand, one arm. When I think of the work I did, the loads I could carry, the strength, effort. *Effortmore? Effortleast?* Effort. Make an effort. Up. One hand, one foot. Two feet, leg better than arm, arm better than hand. Straighten up, step, another. Vastness of the rug, vast as lawn, as grass, no, no, as veldt, veldt where lions hunt. Are there lions today? We'll see.

The chair's by the window. A tricky maneuver, like parallel parking, like sliding heavy trucks and big sedans into tight spaces neat. Lining up, lining up walker, feel chair, easier on the right side, guess on the left, drop. Aha!

Take a breath. Well done; motion's good. I can see the street; ideas all in place, and words coming easier. There are days,

A University of Connecticut teacher, and a mainstream and genre novelist and short story writer, Janice Law has come up with a most unusual tale for *EQMM* this month. The past Edgar winner's new novel, *The Lost Diaries of Iris Weed,* is also off the beaten track, but has "a mystery angle" (see Forge Books/ January). Also currently available from Forge: the trade paperback edition of her previous novel, *The Night Bus.* ✝

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moments of days, times of days, when I think, this will work. I'll beat this, stroke or no stroke, so hang on a bit, hang on.

The window overlooks an old house fitted up with picture windows. It's the office for the lumberyard and hardware store. Front door opens onto parking spaces. Good as TV, really, to watch who comes in and out. Who's driving a new truck and who's got a junker. Who's laying in the paint and lumber and hardware and supplies—and who's in the office trying to raise some credit.

Sitting smack by the window I can see the far corner of the yard and watch them loading ply and two-by-fours and planks. Trucks come out farther up the street, but the driveway right under my window leads to employee parking. That's my interest. Time?

Turn wrist with right hand. Slow. Everything is slow. Is time my friend or my enemy? How much is left? I'm prepared either way; I've had a good life, a long life, oh yes. But there's always going to be something left undone, isn't there? If you've got nothing you're leaving undone, you've overstayed your time.

And yes, there she is, right on time. Black curly hair, black eyes—maybe Puerto Rican? The red coat today; she always looks snappy in that red coat.

I lift my hand and smile—I think I smile. Ellen says, *Yes, yes, you can smile,* but I don't know. Left side a problem all the way up and more up than down. Ellen says I smile okay, and I choose to believe her.

I smile and the pretty woman in the red coat waves back. The day I don't smile at a pretty girl is the day you can put me in the box and nail down the lid. A nice girl, too.

I watch until she gets to her car. Just a habit of mine. I can't say how it started, but it gives the day another landmark besides meals and evening news and the Discovery Channel.

She pulls out and I check the street one last time. No lions today. Her car's a bit of a worry. I'd rather it was newer, faster. You can't be too fast with lions around.

"She needs a fast car," I tell Ellen when she arrives to give me supper. Actually, that's just what I try to say, but it doesn't come out so well. Just a lot of grunts and howls. She brings me the pad and pencil but it's too much effort to try to print. And what would I tell her? The car would have to be explained, and the lions, the lion in particular. I point to the window and try to smile.

"Been flirting with Kim Alverez again? I've seen you waving to her. At your age, too!"

This is a little joke between us. To Ellen I'm "an awful man for the ladies." She fusses about me and I give her extra time off and never notice the housecleaning.

"She's a nice woman. Has her troubles like the rest of us."

I perk up at this. Ellen brings me *tells.* No, no, wrong word

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again. I'm getting tired. Tells me words. Papers, newspapers. Tells me *news.* I look up and nod my head so that she knows I'm interested.

"Her husband was Jimmy Alverez—you know, the policeman who was shot. A drug raid went wrong or something."

For a minute *raid* means nothing and then *drugs* and *policeman come into a kind of focus. I grunt* and wave my hand, and Ellen puts one hand on her hip and concentrates. "A year ago maybe, maybe less. They raided a house on Milk Street and something went wrong. Shots were fired and he was hit. Very sad. And terrible for her. They have a three-year-old."

Talk, talk, I think, but time for dinner—Ellen has to get home. "My man needs his dinner, too, you know," is what she says. My dinner is heated-up turkey, gravy, and canned beans, and mighty good. Ellen helps me into my pajamas and says good night. I try to concentrate the way I could before the stroke, when I read the newspaper every day and remembered things like drug raids gone bad. Something was nasty about the Alverez shooting. *Contraband?* No, but *C,* something with a *C. Controversy,* that's it. The Alverez shooting was *controversial* in some way. I fall asleep on this triumph.

So now it's important that I'm at the window every day, even if there's not much I can do beyond watching Mrs. Alverez get safely to her car. Four-thirty she comes out, waves, and hurries into the parking lot. I put an okay mark on the calendar. I mark each day, awkwardly, because I was a lefty and my right hand doesn't like the pen. End of the week, I look back at the record and check how many lions.

The man stopped by on Monday. He's a big guy with a smooth, hard face. A muscular face is how I'd describe it, like he's done a lot of heavy frowning and scowling. Looks like muscles elsewhere, too, the kind for show, that you don't get with honest labor. He went into the office, but just for a few minutes. So he could have been anyone, no lion at all.

But then Wednesday he was standing on the sidewalk when she came out. He put his hand on her arm, and she pulled away and ran to her car. I saw that and it figured. He'd been hanging around too much for a guy who wasn't in the market for nails or lumber.

Thursday I didn't see him, but the car was there. A Ford, one of the big new ones. I know cars, drove limos for a while, but I couldn't stand sitting cooped up. His car is HXT 030. I wrote it on the calendar in big letters and now I point it out to Ellen.

"License plate?"

Ellen's quick.

I nod.

"Someone bothering you?"

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Shake my head. Point out the window.

She goes and looks but there's nothing. Mrs. Alverez has gone home, and he only comes when she's at work. He's in the grass. He's hunting. Ellen frowns and looks uncertain. She finally brings the pad and a pen.

Hold pen straight. Press down so it doesn't shoot away at an angle. *Bothering Mrs. Alverez* comes out as *Boting msAlVEez.*

Ellen looks at this, looks at me. "Mrs. Alverez? Listen, her husband was a cop. If she doesn't know the police, who would? We best stay out of it." She puts on the nature show for me. "Eagles of the World" tonight.

Eagles soaring with eyes like search lights. Tired. I forget the cops, the drug raid. Jimmy Alverez. Words gone, ideas gone, memory going into holes like swiss cheese. On the screen, a monster eagle, big as a nightmare, fishes in Siberia, and I remember why the Alverez shooting was controversial. It was a *friendly gun,* no, no. A minute, a minute more. Another eagle lands on what looks like a small iceberg. An eagle of the mind that tells me, *friendly fire:* Another cop shot Jimmy Alverez. Ellen had forgotten to mention that.

The next day I pick up my portable phone. Ellen has it programmed: her number, my daughter Ginny's number, my son Kevin's number, 911, and Meals on Wheels. This makes her feel good, although I can't really use the phone. I can listen to Ginny and Kevin all right; awkward calls, their voices, unanswered, are affectionate but uneasy. As for the rest, I don't know what good 911 would do *me.*

Still, Ellen means well. "You won't need the phone book," she said, and she put it in the kitchen, the Long March. So, up. Walker. Today I remember *walker* without trouble. That's a hopeful thing. One day a word is gone, the next it's back. Forward march to the kitchen. Get the phone book. Drop it. Drop it again. On the third try, hang the damn thing over the bar of the walker. Good thing we have a small town, a thin directory. Change direction, hard as turning a sixteen-wheeler. Back to the chair and the big project of sitting down. Then, no paper. Exhausted.

I maybe fall asleep—I sleep easily and often—but I'm visited by eagles hunting. Hunting means lions, and I'm alert again and consult the book. Print small and wobbling. No good. Try the Yellow Pages. Ah! Nice black type and good-sized, too: *Bradford Lumber, Your Place for Wood.* I write the number on the calendar.

Late on the Monday afternoon he's back: HXT 030. I can see the car, panting with exhaust, parked just up the street. He's waiting. I press in the numbers.

You have reached Bradford Lumber. For the yard, press one; for hardware, press two; for the billing office, press three.

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Press three. Hear Mrs. Alverez. "Hello. May I help you? Bradford Lumber."

I hang up and call again. Three times. This must make her nervous. I can tell from her voice, and I feel bad. But then I see her pass the corner window on her way to the front door.

She must have seen his car, because at 4:30 P.M. she leaves with the boss, Henry Johnson, who's not all muscle like the hunter but big enough to give you pause. HXT 030 starts to get out of his car, sees Henry, and drops the idea. Henry walks Mrs. Alverez to her car as HXT 030 drives away. I have the eagle eye all right.

So that's how it is. Every day, I watch for lions. When he drives up, I press in the numbers and her phone rings. She doesn't always go to the door; she knows the signal now, but I'll bet she can't guess where it comes from. She should call the police. It bothers me that she doesn't.

One day Ellen arrives early. The windows are open, and I hear the horn, then voices. Ellen has a good loud voice when she needs one.

". . . blocking the driveway. I need to get in. I have a client . . ."

Lower voice in reply. A man, not too pleased. I get myself up and turn the walker and look through the glass in the front door. Ellen's signaling to get into the drive and giving a big guy in a familiar dark Ford what for.

" . . . police business doesn't need to block *this* driveway," she says, and HXT 030 pulls away.

"So," she says when she comes in. "You don't have to worry. Police business."

I must not look convinced.

"Police. He's plainclothes, maybe undercover."

Ellen is fond of thrillers and cop shows and knows all the lingo.

"But even if he's on a stakeout, he doesn't need to block your driveway. What if you were taken ill?"

I nod, but I'm worried. How to watch both the front and the lumber yard. I wonder if "safe days" just means he's out of my sight. There must always be lions on the veldt. Always.

Just before Ellen leaves, Kevin calls. He tries to call while she is here so he can get a report. "Your dad has a little more energy," Ellen says today. "He's taking more interest."

I smile and nod to encourage her. She does not mention what the interest is, and I smile about that, too, before she gives me the phone.

Kevin tells me how he's doing at work. How Timmy is managing on the baseball team, that Patty's joined the band. He's gotten used to talking without answers, and it's nice in a way. I get to hear him thinking, which you don't always do when you're flapping your mouth.

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"Games, remember all the games, Dad? Soccer, hockey. You used to time for the hockey team. Remember the air horn? That was the height of my ambition: to operate the air horn at the rink." He laughs and I laugh, too.

When I hang up, I grab the walker and set out for the hall closet. Thump down the walker, step, thump, step, thump: a journey. I open the door, a tricky maneuver, then I'm faced with the clutter of forty-plus years and two kids. If Bess were alive, this would all be tidy.

I stand and think about Bess for a bit before I take an old hockey stick and start poking here and there. Down come baseball gloves and garden tools and winter scarves the moths have been after and mouse traps and floor polish. Ellen will have something to say when she sees this!

And then, there it is. A blue and white can . . . canister . . . *canister!* My old air horn. I get it off the top shelf with the hockey stick and tease it out into the hall. I nudge it over toward a kitchen chair where I sit down so that I can—yes!—pick it up. Daily life's an epic if you live long enough.

Rink, smell of chemicals and ice, sound of skate blades and thump of pads against the boards. Kevin, rosy-faced beside me, clutching the air horn. *Is it time, is it time yet?* My eyes on the stopwatch, counting down, *seven, six, five, four* . . . Kevin holds the horn away to the side as he's been taught . . . *two, one.* A hoot that would take your head off. His smile. Pure joy.

I give the can a shake and push the trigger, quick and gentle. Nothing. Shake again. Push, harder this time. Nothing. I set it on the table and start writing a note for Ellen.

The next day, she's not sure this is such a good idea. She's thinking neighbors and the tenants on the second floor and Social Services. Anything I want that she doesn't gets the same response: *You don't want Social Services involved, do you?*

Careful, I tell myself. Don't mention HXT 030 or you're out of luck. I point to the phone and shake my head.

"That's true," Ellen says.

I point to my throat, my mouth.

"Yes," she admits, but first she tries to push the Lifeline Button the local hospital distributes.

I point to the phone, the weak link in all these plans. She argues it out with herself and then I write down the name of the sporting goods store, and she promises to bring me a new air horn. Which she does. The same brand, even, and at the slightest touch it gives a shriek like a steam locomotive. I put it by the window, because by this time there's been a new development.

I almost missed it. HXT 030 hadn't been around for a while. I'd maybe see the car passing, driving by, but no more office visits. No

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more standing out on the sidewalk. He was hidden deep in the grass until the evening *National Geographic* repeated "Sea Turtles, Wonders of the Spring." Grand reptiles, no doubt, but I prefer fur and feathers.

A warm night. I get the side window open and sit down to listen to the starlings and sparrows in the hedge. Tired. I don't bother to put on the light. Eyes closing. Outside, twittering and the occasional car passing, and inside, a memory of large olive-colored turtles paddling over reefs. Paddling, slowing, braking. A car stops. Two car doors open and then I'm right awake. Something makes me grab the walker and begin the big project of getting up and turning around. It's him: right there on the sidewalk, standing beside a guy I know, a suburban psychopath named Gippy Dorgun, who got chucked off our local junior hockey team for going after a ref with his stick.

That was the better part of twenty years ago, and I remember it like yesterday—better than yesterday, to tell the truth. I've forgotten a lot since then, but Gippy's learned nothing except the value of a good lawyer.

They're talking quietly together right there on the driveway of the lumberyard. I can't make out the words, but I see Gippy nod. It is him, I'm sure. You don't forget someone skating toward you with his stick over his head.

Arrest? Maybe an arrest? Could I be wrong, wrong entirely about HXT 030? I'm sure I'm not, and yet I worry even after I see the big fellow clap Gippy on the shoulder, as if something's been settled. They get into the car and drive away.

The next few days there's nothing. Nothing out front of the lumberyard, nothing so far as I know out front of my house. No voices in the night. Maybe I was wrong, dreaming. Maybe there are only sea turtles, drifting placid, not lions. Still, I keep watch every afternoon. It's warm now; I sit on the porch looking both ways. With my air horn.

Red behind my eyes, green circles, green like turtles, bleaching out to pale yellow, to the grass, no, no, to the *veldt,* the lions. I hear lions and open my eyes. I doze in the afternoon, especially in the strong spring sun. The Dutchman's-pipe hasn't really leafed out yet on the porch; the roses took winter death. Is that the right word? Would Bess have called it *winter death?* She was the gardener.

A squeal of brakes, a car door opening but not closing, Gippy Dorgun on the sidewalk heading toward the lumberyard office. Friday afternoon. Payday. A hockey stick in his hand? No, no, that's at the rink, long ago. But I'm awake, and he's carrying something. A friendly gun? *Friendly fire.* I reach down for the air horn. Smooth side of canister. I squeeze the trigger.

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Gippy stops at the door. Memories for him, too. Ice and the rink and the sound of the horn. He skated pretty well; he was just psychotic. I hit the horn again. He goes inside anyway, which is what psychotics do. A minute later a cop car roars up and neighbors look out and the go car, the going car, the *getaway* car, which I guess it is after all, peels off, leaving rubber all down Station Road, amid horns and squeals and a shriek as a pickup truck turning into the yard loses some essential metals.

There's a shot and another. I keep it up with the horn until a guy in uniform runs over to the porch and says to knock it off, the excitement's over. I try to ask about Mrs. Alverez, but everything comes out wrong. I wave my hands and grab a pencil and take special care and get *Mrs. Alverez OK?* printed out mostly all right.

The cop gives me a funny look, as if he doesn't think I'm all there. People do that when you can't speak. Fortunately Ellen arrives and takes over the way she does. "His friend, Mrs. Alverez. He's worried about Mrs. Alverez. She works in the lumberyard office."

It's a good hour before Ellen can find out that Mrs. Alverez bolted as soon as she heard the "siren."

Ellen looks at me and says, "We'll hear from Social Services for sure," but I'm wondering why a siren panicked a cop's wife.

I write down, *Lion kills with friendly fire.* A message with a good many errors in it.

"Lion?" says Ellen, worrying I've maybe taken another bad turn, a mini-stroke, an aftershock.

Tired from all the excitement, that's for sure. From cops and shots and Mrs. Alverez running like a wildebeest. *HXT 030,* I write on the pad. And that's as clear as anything I've ever written.

Ellen grabs the paper, my, she's quick, and tears it up. "Say nothing," she says. Then, "You saw a gun."

It takes me a minute to figure this one out.

"You saw a man with a gun and you let off the air horn to warn everybody. That's all." A significant look.

I nod. That's okay with me, if Mrs. Alverez is safe.

"The police will come," Ellen said. "Maybe the guy in the car, too. You understand?"

I do. And he does. While Ellen hovers over me, fussing at the cops and giving me warning looks, I labor to print out *lion gun.*

"He saw the gun," Ellen tells them quick, before I can scratch out more.

She adds that I've had a severe stroke, that I've lost words. On this big hint, I close my eyes and drop my head, while Ellen tells them how well I manage and describes my rehab. I can tell she's worried about the air horn, Social Services, and grumpy neighbors, but the police are pleased. Except for HXT 030, who is Detec-

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tive Brannak. Even with my eyes half closed, and words all gone to hell, I can tell that.

But what can he do? *Alert Septuagenarian Helps Foil Lumberyard Heist.* Right in the local rag. Ellen is thrilled. The kids and grandkids are impressed to death. I've been a good citizen, an eagle. One of the alert.

So's Mrs. Alverez, and that gets me thinking again soon as I hear the news from Ellen. I sent her to get new batteries for my TV remote and hoped she'd come back with gossip. She didn't disappoint me.

"She's gone, left town, left her job, gone," Ellen repeats, full of surprise. "Gone back home to Puerto Rico with her baby! What do you think of that?"

Ellen doesn't approve, but I think it's smart. A wise decision for a moment when Gippy Dorgun's dead and Detective Brannak's still a cop in good standing.

Gives me something to chew over, that's for sure. Did Brannak get her husband killed? Was he trying to romance her? Did he plan to shut her up permanent? Was he always a lion, or have I been dreaming? I can't decide. Maybe I should have ignored good advice and printed out Gippy Dorgun's name and HXT 030 and seen what the cops would say to that.

But I may find out yet. I still see lions, and I keep my air horn handy. He's out on the veldt, and I'm the one he's watching now. ●

"I didn't really win a free pedicure, did I?"

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by Jon L. Breen

We all have resigned ourselves by now to the fact that life isn't fair, but it remains galling that the most talented and original writers are not always the most famous and commercially successful ones. Asked to name contemporary crime writers as good as or superior to Bill Pronzini, I'd be hard-pressed to come up with more than half a dozen, but I could rattle off a score of lesser but more highly publicized practitioners without drawing a breath. William Harrington never achieved the best-selling fame of John Grisham, Scott Turow, or Steve Martini, but he ranked with the very best creators of courtroom fiction and produced outstanding non-legal thrillers as well. Pronzini's latest is rumored to be the last in a distinguished series of private-eye novels, while what may be the last title of any kind over Harrington's byline embodies a poignant irony.

**** Bill Pronzini: *Bleeders,* Carroll & Graf, $24. San Francisco's "Nameless Detective," working on a complex blackmail case, survives death through pure luck when a killer's gun misfires. Questions of mortality and personal priorities, including his duty to his wife and adopted ten-year-old daughter, occupy the realistically traumatized sleuth as he tracks the shooter down. The route to a unique and satisfying denouement is marked by sharp prose, crisp pace, and the ability to involve the reader emotionally. If this is really the last Nameless novel, it's an appropriate conclusion, but the door to future sequels is left open at least a crack.

** William Harrington: *Elliott Roosevelt's™ Murder at the President's Door,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Roosevelt died in 1990, but his publishers disingenuously assured readers he had left behind a slew of unpublished manuscripts, allowing the series casting his mother Eleanor as detective to con-

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tinue throughout the decade. Harrington, ghostwriter of the series from the beginning, at last gets title-page credit, but only after his own death in 2000. In 1933, the murder of a guard outside the President's bedroom illustrates the sad state of White House security. Guest celebrities range from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes to Louis Armstrong. Some readers may find the role given General Douglas MacArthur in dubious taste. While the Roosevelt novels are far from Harrington's best work, the historical tidbits are always fun.

**** Sara Paretsky: *Total Recall,* Delacorte, $25.95. The latest about Chicago private eye V.I. Warshawski is among the best in the series, a masterful example of the recent mystery-fiction trend of blending past and present. The wonderfully complicated plot involves insurance fraud, recovered memory therapy, and (most strikingly) the experiences of V.I.'s friend and surrogate mother Dr. Lotty Herschel as a beneficiary of the World War II kindertransport. (Paretsky inadvertently provides herself a promising hook for the next book in the series: Her sleuth's current romantic interest, Morrell, is off to Afghanistan. In a chilling coincidence, the book's official publication date was September 11, 2001.)

*** Linda Fairstein: *The Deadhouse,* Scribner, $25. Alex Cooper, like her creator a Manhattan prosecutor specializing in sex crimes, investigates when a college professor whose murder has been faked in a sting operation intended to smoke out her abusive ex-husband is actually murdered, her death having some connection with an urban anthropological project in a deserted hospital on Roosevelt Island. It's a solid job, notable for insider knowledge of the background and some interesting New York history to go with the complex plot.

*** H.R.F. Keating: *Breaking and Entering,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Bombay's Inspector Ghote, with the dubious help of his Swedish friend Axel Svensson (introduced in the first book in the series, *The Perfect Murder* [1964]), searches for a daring jewel thief while lamenting his exclusion from a major murder investigation. Will the two cases come together? Somewhat lighter in mood than recent Ghotes, it's enjoyable as ever.

Sometimes when you've heard for years that a certain book is a cult classic or a past writer an undervalued master, it's hard for the reality to live up to the hype. Such is not the case with Norbert Davis's 1943 novel *The Mouse in the Mountain* (Rue Morgue, $14), the first of three novels about the team of Doan and Carstairs. The humor, the pace, the background of World War II-era Mexico, the surprising plot, and one of the great crime-fiction earthquakes combine to ratify the high opinion pulp historians have of Davis, a

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gifted but tragic figure as shown in Tom and Enid Schantz's introduction. Doan is a deceptively ordinary-looking private eye with a distinctive style, and the Great Dane Carstairs is one of the most memorable animal characters in mystery fiction, his superior attitude and abilities made quite believable without undermining his essential canine nature.

Mystery Street (Signet, $6.50), edited by Robert J. Randisi, may not rank with the best Private Eye Writers of America original anthologies, but it has its moments, including a clever variation on the stalker situation and a fresh P.I. voice in newcomer Marcus Pelegrimas's "Eyes on the Road," plus solid cases for Loren D. Estleman's Amos Walker, Jerry Kennealy's Nick Polo, Warren Murphy's Devlin Tracy, S. J. Rozan's Lydia Chin, and Percy Spurlark Parker's Trevor Oaks. Parker's Las Vegas private eye has an even stronger outing in another collection of new stories, *Fedora: Private Eyes and Tough Guys* (Wildside, $37.95), edited by Michael Bracken, which also includes a good case for Shelley Singer's classic-car-dealer sleuth April Pinck; a satisfying non-series revenge tale, "Reunion" by Dan A. Sproul; and a searing piece of social commentary by a crime-fiction master, Michael Collins's "The Horrible, Senseless Murders of Two Elderly Women."

Two for the coffee table (and the reference shelf), both from Collectors Press: Richard A. Lupoff's *The Great American Paperback* ($60) and the reissue of Frank M. Robinson and Lawrence Davidson's *Pulp Culture: The Art of Fiction Magazines* ($39.95), first published in 1998. Admirers of popular illustration will want both books. Their subjects are popular fiction generally, but mysteries loom the largest. Robinson and Davidson's color reproductions of those glorious pulp magazine covers offer even greater visual appeal than Lupoff's paperback covers, but Lupoff's lengthier text has more informational and critical content.

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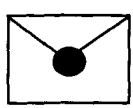

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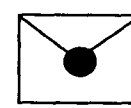

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Art by Allen Davis

TOWER TO NOWHERE

by Edward D. Hoch

"Rand, I'm telling you she climbed to the top of the Monument in the center of London and vanished in broad daylight," Parkinson said.

When Rand retired from the Department of Concealed Communications, his position had been filled by young Ray Parkinson. With the end of the Cold War, Double-C was merged into British Intelligence proper, and before long Rand heard that Parkinson had left government service for private employment. He'd become an investigative journalist for one of the leading London tabloids, a bit of news that had made Rand shudder when first he'd heard it.

That was why he was somewhat surprised when Leila came into his study one Saturday morning in August and held out the cordless phone to him. "It's Ray Parkinson," she announced. "He's at the station and would like to come out and see us."

"Here? The Reading station?"

She nodded and passed him the phone.

"Hello, Ray. What's up?"

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"I need help with something, sir, and I thought of you. It's a bit of a mystery."

"Come ahead. We'll be here all afternoon."

They hadn't seen Parkinson since some business in Scotland nearly nine years earlier, when he was still with Double-C. Now he'd put on weight and was starting to show his fifty-odd years. He arrived with a slender leather attaché case, overdressed for a weekend journey to Reading, and Leila immediately invited him to remove his coat. "I believe I'll do that," he said with a smile. "The train down from London was a bit stuffy."

"Tower to Nowhere" is a rare instance of an impossible crime story in the Rand series. The Edward D. Hoch series that more regularly involves impossible crimes, the historical mysteries featuring Dr. Sam Hawthorne, recently received the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention's Anthony Award for best short story for its entry "The Problem of the Potting Shed." †

Leila retreated with his jacket, promising to bring cool drinks, and Rand had an opportunity to study the man. Certainly he could no longer be referred to as young Parkinson. The old boyish charm of his body and features had hardened into stocky middle age. His thinning blond hair was losing its color. "Now then," Rand began, "how's the newspaper business been treating you?"

"Very well, actually. Linda and I have a home on Campden Hill and our son will be entering the University next year."

"Time does move along," Rand said, bringing an end to the small talk. "What can I help you with?"

"First I need to tell you a bit about my job."

"Yes, I've seen your weekly column and picture in the tabloid. Sort of an upper-class gossip column."

"Well, yes," Parkinson replied, perhaps a bit embarrassed. "Actually it's closer to the type of work I did at Double-C. You're probably aware that a skilled eavesdropper can pick up calls made on a cell phone."

"So I understand, from some of the more sensational reports on members of the royal family a few years back."

"That's my specialty. It's all a matter of breaking the code, finding the frequency, and listening in. My target at the moment is Lord—"

Rand raised his hand to interrupt. "I'd rather not know unless it's important to your story. I can't say I put too much stock in the new journalism."

"Well, anyway—" He paused again as Leila returned with two gin-and-tonics.

"Aren't you joining us?" Rand asked.

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She shook her head, knowing instinctively that Parkinson would speak more freely without her present. "Noonday drinking isn't for me. And I have some bushes that need trimming out back."

"You have a nice place here," Parkinson said as she departed. "Does Leila still lecture at the University?"

Rand nodded. "Archaeology. She's a full professor now."

"Very good. Did you ever write that book about your years in Double-C?"

"Not much I could say, in view of the Official Secrets Act. But you were telling me about your problem or mystery or whatever it is."

"Yes. I know you're good at this sort of thing, and after three days of dead ends I'm willing to try anything."

"Just tell me."

"He's well known, a member of the House of Lords, happily married with a family. I had a tip that he was a bit of a swinger, but then, aren't we all?"

Rand was growing impatient. "Get on with it, Ray."

He took a sip of his drink as if working up courage. "I followed him a few times and saw him with a blond young lady, not his wife or daughter. She has a flat in Mayfair and her name is Maggie Pidgeon. I did a little digging and discovered Abra Associates have paid her rent monthly ever since she moved in over a year ago. Abra is one of several companies owned by Lord Valentine."

Rand sighed. "I asked you not to mention his name."

"It'll be in the papers as soon as the story breaks anyhow."

"Which story is that?"

"Maggie Pidgeon has disappeared."

"It happens all the time. In America—"

"I'm talking about here in London, last Wednesday afternoon." He was warming to the subject now, and the words seemed to tumble out of him. "Rand, I'm telling you she climbed to the top of the Monument in the center of London and vanished in broad daylight."

"The Great Fire of London monument?"

"Yes." In London it was called simply the Monument, a massive stone pillar reaching up 202 feet, designed in part by Sir Christopher Wren to commemorate the Great Fire of London in 1666, and to celebrate the rebuilding of the city. It was located on Monument Street, near the northern end of London Bridge. For a pound and a half admission, one could climb the cantilevered stone staircase within the pillar to an enclosed viewing platform near the top. It was mainly the young who made the journey, since there were 311 steps to climb.

"You'd better tell me exactly what happened," Rand suggested.

"I had the evidence of their affair in the fact that he was paying for her flat in Mayfair. I even had a picture of her snapped from a distance outside her building, but I needed a photograph of them

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together. I was following his car and I intercepted a call from her cell phone saying she'd meet him at the Monument at five-fifteen that afternoon."

"This was on Wednesday?"

"Correct. I wanted to get there ahead of him so I'd be in a good position for a photo. I broke off the surveillance and headed directly across town to the Monument. It was slow going because of the traffic, but I arrived there shortly before five and parked my car about a block away on Fish Street Hill, taking up a position in the doorway of an office building directly across from the entrance to the Monument. Miss Pidgeon is easy to spot because of her long blond hair, and when the crowd thinned out I saw her standing near the Monument, wearing a white blouse and dark slacks, smoking a cigarette. It was almost five-fifteen, and as the time for the meeting approached she checked her watch a couple of times. He must have been stuck in traffic because he hadn't arrived by five twenty-five. She was on her second cigarette by this time but she stubbed it out and tossed it into a trash can. Then she hurried into the Monument entrance. I knew they were closing soon, so I thought she'd be right out. When she didn't come, I decided to risk following her inside. Actually the place stays open till six, but they don't sell any tickets past five-forty."

"There was still no sign of Lord Valentine?"

"None. One of the young women at the ticket counter told me they closed in a few minutes and I wouldn't have time to make the climb to the top. I said I was looking for a blond girl who just came in and she said a blonde had gone up the stairs. Was there anyone else up there? A man, she said, who'd arrived just before five. I put down my pound and a half, and started up the steps. If they were up there together, I had them trapped. There was no other way out of the place."

"You had your camera, of course."

Parkinson took another drink. "Of course. I'd already taken a picture of her waiting for him. Anyway, the woman at the ticket counter called after me and asked my name, said she needed it for the certificate I'd receive on my way out. I wasn't about to give my real name, so I told her it was Clark Kent. That seemed to satisfy her."

"You mean you climbed all the way to the top of that thing?" Rand asked.

"Believe me, I rested about every twenty steps. I wasn't even halfway up when the man appeared, descending quickly. He was a bald Asian, built like a wrestler. I asked him if the blond lady was up there, but he just grunted and kept on going. Apparently he didn't speak English."

"Are you telling me you got all the way to the top of the Monument and she was gone?"

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"That's exactly what I'm telling you. And she hasn't returned to her apartment. I checked with the doorman. He identified her from my photos and swore he hadn't seen her since she went out Wednesday morning at the usual time. Yesterday I finally phoned Lord Valentine himself to tell him of her disappearance and he denied knowing anyone named Maggie Pidgeon. When I told him her rent was being paid by Abra Associates he hung up on me."

Rand thought about it for a few moments and then said, "As I see it, Ray, there are only three possibilities. One, she jumped from the viewing platform and landed on some sort of truck passing below."

Parkinson shook his head. "In the old days there was only a chest-high railing around the platform. But a few people did jump, and since there's not always an attendant on duty up there, they decided to enclose the entire platform with an iron cage. There's no way anyone could jump, nor be lifted off by helicopter, in case you're thinking of that possibility, too."

"All right, number two. She never entered the Monument in the first place."

"I saw her enter with my own eyes, Rand, and she didn't come out. Both women staff members confirm it, and the one at the ticket counter showed me the record of an admission ticket purchase on her computer. She even showed me the certificate she'd made out in the name of Maggie Pidgeon, to be presented to her when she returned from her climb."

"I've never been to the Monument," Rand admitted, "but these places must have rest rooms. Could she have been in there?"

Parkinson shook his head. "As it happens, the ticket sellers were preparing to close as I entered. One of the young women was checking the rest rooms in preparation for locking their doors. Both rooms are quite small, and both were empty."

Rand sighed. "Third possibility, you're telling me a pack of lies, Ray."

After those words, there was nothing Rand could do but accompany Parkinson back to London on the afternoon train. It was only twenty-five minutes to Paddington Station, and from there they could take the Underground to their destination. Parkinson was intent on proving he'd spoken the truth, even if it meant returning to the Monument on that very day.

"You must have reported this disappearance to the police," Rand suggested on the train.

"A constable was on duty nearby, but he wasn't awfully interested, said she must have slipped out when no one was looking. We showed him the certificate she never picked up, but he had an answer for that, too. The climb had frightened or exhausted her, and she bolted from the place without reaching the top. She

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probably felt she didn't deserve the certificate."

"Perhaps it's as simple as that," Rand said, knowing that it wasn't.

"Do you think she could have gotten by me, even if both the ticket women missed her? I was standing right outside. Neither she nor anyone else came out of the Monument."

"What about these pictures you took of her?"

He opened the slender attaché case and took out a pair of eight-by-ten prints. One, from a week earlier, showed a young woman with curly blond hair wearing sunglasses, her face partly turned from the camera as she entered an upscale apartment building. She was wearing tan slacks and a dark top, with a purse slung over her right shoulder on a short strap. "As I mentioned, I've already questioned the doorman. He hasn't seen her since she went off to work Wednesday morning. But he said she was often away for a few days. With Lord Valentine, no doubt."

"And this is the picture you took at the Monument?"

"That's right. My camera records the time at the bottom of each photo. This one was taken Wednesday at five-fourteen, while she was waiting for him."

Rand studied the photograph with an intensity he'd once devoted to microdots and one-time pads. It was certainly the same woman, with the same curly hairdo and the same sunglasses, standing with her right hand holding a cigarette to her lips while her left hand clutched the pack it had come from. This time she wore the white blouse and dark slacks Parkinson had described, with no accessories. The area around the Monument was crowded as office staffs headed home at day's end. "Could you enlarge this portion to get a better view of her?" Rand asked.

"I could, but I'd begin to lose details. This model of digital camera is fine up to an eight-by-ten enlargement. Above that, the individual pixels begin to show."

Rand returned the pictures to him as the train began to lose speed approaching Paddington Station. Before long they emerged at the Monument stop on the Underground and walked down Fish Street Hill to Monument Street and the tower itself. "Dare I admit I've never been inside?" Rand confessed. "I suppose it's a bit like New Yorkers who've never been out to the Statue of Liberty."

They approached the Monument from the side, where the pavement slanted down a bit, and paused to study the elaborate relief carving in the stone with a lengthy inscription beneath it. It showed King Charles II in a Roman costume, guiding the rebuilding of the city. "At one time the inscription contained a reference to popish frenzy, but that was removed long ago," Parkinson told him. "The height of the Monument is two hundred and two feet, the exact distance to the spot where the fire began in the house of

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the king's baker, right around the corner in Pudding Lane."

Inside, they were welcomed by two young women in identical staff jackets with nametags. Parkinson greeted them both, and it was obvious they'd been on duty Wednesday as well. "Did you find her yet?" the ticket seller asked, and Parkinson shook his head. She was a brown-haired girl named Liza Blanchard, with glasses and a pleasant smile. Both girls were of average height, in their early twenties, but the other was a dark-skinned Indian or Pakistani named Jamila Latif, standing at that moment behind a small souvenir counter. "Today you have brought a friend with you," she said.

"A chap I used to work with. He's going to help me find Maggie Pidgeon."

"How will you do that?" the ticket seller asked Rand.

"First I want to have the facts clear in my mind. This blond woman entered the Monument shortly before closing, correct?"

It was Jamila who replied, while Liza tended to a group of American teenagers excited at the prospect of climbing the tower. "That's right. She paid her money and started up the steps. Liza asked her name so she could write it on the certificate. Usually we wait till they come down, but that late in the day we like to speed things along so we can close on time."

"What name did she give?"

"Maggie Pidgeon."

"Had you ever seen her before?"

"Not that we remembered. But we get a lot of people through here during the summer."

"I understand there was a man already up there?"

Jamila nodded. "A fat man. I didn't think he'd make the climb, but I guess he did it."

"What name did he give?"

Liza answered from her ticket counter while the teenagers started their climb. "John Wu. It's not a name you forget."

"Then what happened, after she went up the steps?"

"After five minutes or so this man came in," she said, indicating Parkinson. "He asked about the blond girl and we told him she was up there. He paid his money and insisted on going up after her, even though we told him we were ready to close. He had a camera."

Parkinson put down three one-pound coins. "Are you coming up with me, Rand?" He accepted two descriptive pamphlets from Liza.

"How many steps?"

"Three hundred eleven."

Rand sighed and followed the younger man up. "Leila and I once climbed to the top of Egypt's Great Pyramid, but I was a good deal younger then."

It was a long, hard climb for Rand, and he found himself stop-

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ping even more frequently than Parkinson. Leila would have called him an idiot for even attempting it at his age, but he had to see the top for himself. Soon they met the teenagers, beginning their noisy descent.

After all those steps there was a doorway, and he followed Parkinson onto the enclosed viewing platform. A breathtaking panorama of the entire city was before them, from the nearby London Bridge to the spectacular Tower Bridge and Tower of London a bit farther downstream, from the surrounding office blocks and soaring St. Paul's Cathedral to the magnificent Canary Wharf off in the opposite direction.

"Quite a view," Rand said. He saw that they were not even at the top of the Monument. Some distance above their heads, seen through the top of the barred cage, was a tapering top supporting a shiny vase of copper flames that glistened in the afternoon sun, a fitting memorial to the Great Fire.

"You can see the original railing there," Parkinson pointed out. "This cage was built around it to put an end to the suicides." He consulted the pamphlet. "The first was a weaver named William Green in seventeen fifty. Boswell climbed it in seventeen sixty-two and was quite frightened by the height. After the suicides of two servant girls in eighteen thirty-nine and eighteen forty-two, the decision was made to enclose the whole thing in an iron cage. This one is a more modern version but just as effective. Maggie Pidgeon didn't go anywhere from here except back downstairs."

"There's certainly no place she could have hidden," Rand agreed.

They retraced their steps to the bottom, passing a few more tourists much younger than themselves. "Do you want another certificate, Mr. Kent?" Liza asked Parkinson, remembering the name he'd given on his previous visit.

"I don't need another, but my friend here does. Jeffery Rand." He advised Liza of the correct spelling for the first name and she inscribed it on the certificate. "Something to show your wife," he said, presenting it to Rand. "We may be back with more questions," he told the young women.

"Not for me, you won't," Jamila said. "I'm on two weeks' holiday starting tomorrow. Liza will have to get by without me."

Liza grinned. "They're sending a man to substitute for you. That'll be an improvement."

Rand and Parkinson had just left the Monument, crossing the street in the direction of the Underground, when they were accosted by a tall fiftyish man with gray hair and an expensive suit to match. He seemed out of place on a Saturday when most offices would be closed, but Parkinson recognized him at once. "Lord Valentine! What are you doing—?"

The man seized Parkinson by the front of his shirt, nearly

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pulling him off his feet. "I've had enough of your trashy journalism, Parkinson. Stay out of my business or you'll regret it!"

Parkinson pulled himself free of the other's grip. "The lady has disappeared, sir. That's news and I intend to cover it."

"I've told you, I know of no such woman. If your rag publishes one word about me you'll be sued for libel."

"Pardon me," Rand interrupted, quickly introducing himself. "I worked with Parkinson in British Intelligence for a number of years. I can attest to the man's integrity."

Valentine studied Rand more closely. "Then call him off, or he'll regret it." He turned on his heel and retreated across the street.

"What do you make of that?" Parkinson asked.

Rand considered it. "His words meant nothing. The most interesting thing was his presence here. He was headed for the Monument until he ran into us. Is it possible that he's searching for Maggie Pidgeon, too, the same as you are?"

Before Rand headed back to the station, Parkinson had another suggestion. "I've arranged an interview with Lord Valentine's wife for later this afternoon. Could you spare another couple of hours and accompany me?"

"I can't imagine she'd have anything to say to the tabloid press."

"That's why I'd like you along. You lend an air of respectability."

Rand chuckled. "First time anyone ever told me that!"

He phoned Leila to tell her the business of the missing woman was delaying him longer than planned. "You'd better go ahead and eat without me. I'll grab something here."

"Jeffery, what has he involved you in?"

"I don't exactly know, but I certainly am curious."

They met with Lady Valentine in the lobby of the Dorchester Hotel on Park Lane. It was teatime, and she seemed perfectly at home on the lobby sofa, being served by a waiter who brought her a plate of tiny sandwiches along with tea. "I suppose one of you is Mr. Parkinson," she said as they approached.

"I am. This is my good friend Jeffery Rand."

Lady Valentine seemed a good deal younger than her husband, perhaps near forty, and she carried with her the aura of wealth and privilege. She motioned for Rand and Parkinson to be seated, but did not offer them tea. That would be for the waiter to do.

"What is this about my husband?" she asked.

Parkinson cleared his throat. "Lady Valentine, do you know a woman named Maggie Pidgeon?"

"I know of her, a bottle blonde whom he keeps in a Mayfair flat. She is one of the reasons for our separation."

"Separation?"

Lady Valentine smiled. "I've given you a scoop, haven't I? I'm

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taking a suite here at the Dorchester for the present."

"That's certainly news! Are you aware that Miss Pidgeon has been missing since Wednesday? She disappeared under mysterious circumstances from the top of the Monument."

"Monument?" It took her a moment to comprehend. "You mean that monument to the Great Fire? Did she kill herself?"

"We don't know. She just disappeared."

"What do you want from me?" she asked, pouring herself another cup of tea.

"Do you have any idea what might have happened to her?"

"How would I know? She probably found some new lover with deeper pockets and a shorter life expectancy than my husband."

"May I quote you on that?"

"Certainly not. You may announce our separation, but that is all." She shot a glance at Rand, still not certain of his connection. "And that goes for you, too."

"Of course," Rand readily agreed.

"One other question, Lady Valentine. Have you ever met Maggie Pidgeon?"

"I saw them once, a week ago, coming out of her flat. I'd hardly call it a meeting, since my husband neglected to introduce us."

"How long had your husband known her?"

"Perhaps you'd have a better idea about that than I do."

Parkinson shrugged. "His company has been paying the rent on her flat for just over a year."

"Then that answers your question."

"How did you learn about it? You said you saw them coming out of her flat."

"Someone phoned me with a tip."

"Man or woman?"

"A woman. She gave me the address and claimed I'd learn something interesting about my husband there. She was correct. I certainly did learn something interesting. Of course there were other affairs in the past. This newest one was interesting but hardly surprising. I had it out with him the following day, and told him I was moving out."

"Is there any chance of a reconciliation?"

She put down her tea cup. "Only if he disposes of Miss Pidgeon."

Parkinson nodded. "Well, perhaps he's done just that."

They left the Dorchester a few minutes later, with Parkinson edgy to phone in his story to the paper. "This is news, Rand. Their separation will make the front page."

"It would be even more news if you could locate the vanished Miss Pidgeon."

"I was hoping you could help with that."

Rand was anxious to catch the next train back to Reading, but

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he paused for one more question. "Tell me something, Ray. You said you had a tip about Lord Valentine and Maggie Pidgeon. Who was the tip from?"

"It was anonymous," he admitted. "A phone-in to my voice mail."

"Man or woman?"

"Woman."

It gave Rand something to think about on his ride home.

Sunday morning was usually a time for relaxing in the Rand household. Leila liked to sleep late and Rand often prepared a big breakfast for them, his sole attempt at meal preparation during the week. It was close to ten and he was just starting the eggs when the telephone rang. It was Parkinson, sounding excited.

"Rand, you've got to come in! I need you! A body's turned up and it might be hers."

"Body?" Rand was still trying to clear the cobwebs from his brain. "What are you talking about?"

"Maggie Pidgeon, the missing mistress! A badly burned body was dumped in the street outside her apartment building overnight. The doorman found it and called the police. A purse with some of her belongings was found with it."

"All right," Rand told him. "I'll take a train in later this morning. Where will you be?"

"At the paper." He gave Rand the address in Cheapside.

London streets that August Sunday seemed to have been surrendered to the tourists, but Rand had no trouble reaching Parkinson's office just after noon. He realized at once that the place was in turmoil. "The police are with Mr. Parkinson right now," the receptionist told him. "You can wait in the conference room if you'd like. He has someone else waiting to see him, too."

The "someone else" proved to be Lord Valentine, which shouldn't have surprised Rand. The gray-haired man half rose when Rand entered the room but then resumed his seat when he recognized the newcomer. "You're Mr. Rand, aren't you? Parkinson's friend from yesterday?"

"That's correct."

"I suppose you know they've found her."

"Has the body definitely been identified?"

"It will be," he replied with some certainty. "This entire matter is a plot to ruin me, to drive me out of public life, and Parkinson's people won't get away with it." His face grew red with anger as he spoke the words.

"Exactly who are Parkinson's people?" Rand wondered.

"This paper! This rag of a newspaper! I know about them and I know about Parkinson, too! He was cashiered from British Intelligence."

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The use of the military term startled Rand. "I don't believe that's accurate, sir. Perhaps he was made redundant by the changing nature of cryptography, but you could hardly say he was cashiered."

"Have it your way," he said with an indifferent shrug.

"Let me ask you something. I'm trying to get to the bottom of this business, too, and perhaps you'll speak more freely to me than to Parkinson."

"Freely about what?"

"Miss Pidgeon."

"I—"

"How did you happen to meet her?"

For a moment Valentine was silent and Rand thought his question was being ignored. Finally he said, with something like a sigh, "I met her about eighteen months ago at a London restaurant called Blondie's. It's American-owned and all the waitresses have blond hair. She had a day job with the government and worked there as a waitress in the evening. Maggie was a lovely young woman and we hit it off immediately. Within a few months I suggested she move to a flat in Mayfair, which one of my companies would arrange for. She agreed, and our relationship has continued since that time. Recently that man Parkinson—"

Their exchange was interrupted by Parkinson's appearance at the door. His face seemed drained of blood and his eyes were red-rimmed with sleeplessness. "You'll have to excuse me," he told them. "The City of London police have been called in, too, because of her having disappeared from the Monument. They're chewing over every detail."

"I hope you're satisfied now that her body's been found," Lord Valentine said. "No doubt it was your badgering that led to her death."

"How can you say that?" Parkinson wondered. "Until today our paper had printed not one word about your affair with that young woman."

"Until today? What does that mean?"

"Naturally, the discovery of a body changes everything. We'll lead with the story in tomorrow's edition."

"My God! And what will your headline be? *Great Fire of London Claims Missing Mistress*?"

"Something like that," Parkinson admitted. "I don't write the headlines."

Lord Valentine was grim-faced. "I have already spoken to you about the libel laws. Now I desire a word with your editor."

"I'll see about it," Parkinson said, lifting a phone from the table. He spoke with someone on the other end and after a few minutes one of the secretaries arrived to escort Lord Valentine to the editor's office.

When they were alone, Parkinson gave a sigh of relief. "I'll let

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the higher-ups deal with that one. They'll promise him enough to keep him happy overnight, until he sees tomorrow's edition."

"Are you going after him, then?"

"Of course! His mistress vanished and chances are they'll identify her body. The purse is definitely hers."

"Odd that it wasn't burned along with the body."

"I believe it was singed a bit."

Rand wasn't satisfied. "The whole thing makes no sense, you know. A body is usually burned to prevent identification. Why burn it and then deposit it in front of the victim's own residence, complete with identification?"

"I'm more interested in how she disappeared in the first place. I've been wondering about that fat Asian I passed on the tower stairs."

"What was his name? John Wu? You certainly don't think that was Maggie Pidgeon in disguise, do you? The ticket sellers had a record of him going up."

"You know those fat suits that actors sometimes wear in films, Rand. Suppose Wu had some sort of inflatable body suit and she got in there with him."

"And the two of them walked down three hundred and eleven steps like that, hugging each other inside his suit? Are you mad, Ray? Do you think you wouldn't have noticed something amiss? You told me yourself that he was descending quickly. I'd buy an invisible woman, or even a time-traveling one, before I'd buy that. Have you made any attempt to find John Wu?"

"It's a pretty common name," Parkinson said, showing his dejection. "I called those listed in the telephone directory without success, but chances are he was a tourist anyway."

"All right," Rand told him. "Let me have another look at those two photos you snapped." Parkinson went out and returned with them after a few minutes. They were the same as the first time. Nothing had changed. Maggie Pidgeon was still smoking her cigarette.

"The cigarette!" Rand said suddenly. "That's it! I think I know what happened to her."

It was late afternoon before Rand managed to make his case to the police. By the time he returned to the Monument it was after five. Liza Blanchard was at the ticket counter along with Jamila's male replacement, a pimply-faced lad named Winston. "Did you find her yet?" Liza asked Rand.

"Maggie Pidgeon? Yes, we found her just today."

"I heard about the body. It was on the news."

"It's not Maggie's body."

She cocked her head as if she hadn't heard him correctly. "But

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you said you found her."

"I did. Liza, you are Maggie Pidgeon."

She was fast, too fast for Rand as she ran for the doorway, but then that was why the police were waiting outside.

"It was the cigarette," Rand told her a bit later, when she'd decided to remain silent. "Parkinson took two pictures of you, one outside your flat and the other outside the Monument shortly before you performed your disappearing act. You were smoking a cigarette then, and holding the pack in your other hand, but you had no other accessories. Something was missing, and I finally figured out what it was. You had no purse. The shoulder bag from the other photo was nowhere in evidence. Women need purses, and certainly you did. You had cigarettes, sunglasses, and a cell phone that had to be carried somewhere, to say nothing of cosmetics."

She shifted in her chair but said nothing.

"Then it occurred to me that men and women are often seen standing outside of buildings smoking cigarettes these days. They are employees who are forbidden to smoke indoors. Like the staff of all other public buildings in London, you had to go outdoors for your cigarettes. And the realization came to me that the mysterious Maggie Pidgeon could be one of the ticket sellers, wearing a blond wig. With your uniform jacket and nametag on, and the wig removed, you could quickly become another person. You and Jamila are about the same size, but Jamila's skin is much too dark for her to have made the switch. However, Liza Blanchard could have done it. Your face was partly obscured in both of Parkinson's photographs."

Still there was silence.

"What had I learned about this Maggie Pidgeon? I knew that when Lord Valentine met her she had a day job with the government and worked nights at a restaurant called Blondie's. That might explain the blond wig, since the waitresses there had to be blond. And the doorman told us she still went off to work at the usual time each morning, presumably to her government job, which as it turns out was selling tickets at the Monument." He stared at her for a moment. "It's only a matter of time before that body is identified, Liza. It's Jamila Latif, isn't it? You'd better tell us why you killed her."

She started talking then, as the police stenographer took down her words. "It was just a joke at first," she told them. "Jamila knew about my relationship with Lord Valentine. I'd talked freely with her about it. But he didn't know where I worked. The few times he picked me up at the Monument I always had my wig on. He knew it was a wig, of course, but he didn't know I had two separate identities. Last Wednesday the traffic must have delayed him, and I became nervous when I saw that man Parkinson taking my pic-

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ture. I recognized him from the photo in his column and I hurried back inside to shed the wig and resume my real identity. After a few moments he came in, too, with his camera, looking for the blond girl. Jamila and I thought it would be great fun to tell him she'd gone to the top of the tower. With his age and weight we never thought he'd go up after her. He did, and, of course, she wasn't there. At that point I had to think fast, purchasing a fake ticket on the computer and entering her name on one of the certificates. We had to stick to our story, and to make it seem more reasonable I decided Maggie Pidgeon had to disappear. The scandal would have ended my relationship with Lord Valentine anyway. Instead of returning to my flat, I bedded down with Jamila. She was going on holiday anyway, and I would simply have remained at her place."

"What happened?"

"It went bad last night, when she was leaving on her holiday. She demanded money from me or she said she'd tell Parkinson and Lord Valentine where I was. She said she'd already phoned both Parkinson and Lady Valentine about our affair in an attempt to make some money out of it. I just couldn't believe this from a girl I'd thought of as my friend. We had a terrible argument in her kitchen and I hit her with a skillet. In an instant she was dead, and I saw my life in ruins. I couldn't go to Lord Valentine or anyone else. After midnight I put her body in a plastic garbage bag and took it down on the freight elevator. I put it in her car out back and drove up to a deserted portion of Hampstead Heath. I set the body on fire with petrol, trying to hide the color of her skin. Afterward I smothered the flames with a blanket and dumped the body in front of Maggie's flat, along with the purse. I just wanted to delay identification, to give myself time to think out my next move."

"And did you?"

"Yes," she said with resignation. "This is it."

Later Parkinson accompanied Rand to the station for the train back to Reading. "So Valentine didn't know she worked at the Monument under another name?" he asked.

Rand shook his head. "He simply wanted to see the place where she'd disappeared. If we hadn't intercepted him yesterday he surely would have walked into the Monument and recognized her at once."

"How did you know the dead woman was Jamila Latif?"

"That was an educated guess. Jamila had joined Liza in lying about Maggie Pidgeon climbing the tower, and she obviously knew what was going on. She was also conveniently away on holiday. I didn't know why Liza killed her, but it was at least a strong possibility."

"I don't know how I can thank you for all this," Parkinson said.

As he boarded the train, Rand offered a suggestion. "Don't call me again for another nine years." ●

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THREE'S COMPANY

by Eileen Dewhurst

"You could come with me, you know," she said, watching him. "Why don't you? Once in a while at least. Peter and Emma are always telling me how much they'd like for you to spend the night with them as well."

Her husband yawned and stretched, smiling his pleasure at watching her as she dressed, and she turned away, shrugging, before his answer came.

"I'll join you one of these days, Alma, but it's a bit of a journey at the end of a working day, and it's not as if we don't see Peter and Emma at the golf club at weekends. Tell them thank you when you see them tonight, and I'll tell them myself on Saturday."

"Okay," she said lightly. "So long as you don't mind sleeping alone every Wednesday night."

"I do mind. Come here. . . ."

She moved over to the bed, but her air of imminent, unpostponable departure inhibited him from doing more than laying his hand on her arm and telling her she was working too hard.

"I only go this early when I'm at the Guildford office. It's time you were on the move, too, by the way."

He glanced at the bedside clock. "By God, yes!" He was out of bed and rummaging around for his dressing gown, his respect for routine taking over from his disappointment that she was on her way without the matutinal dalliance he so much enjoyed.

She kissed his cheek as he blundered past her, one leg into his y-fronts. "See you tomorrow night, my darling. And I'll ring as usual tonight, of course."

Liverpool native Eileen Dewhurst is the author of nearly two dozen novels and many short stories. Her stories, like her books, show her interest in, as she puts it, "reactions and relationships under stress in everyday life—out of which the frightening and the dangerous can arise with peculiar shock." Even in very short tales such as this one for *EQMM*, she manages to evoke that sense of shock. †

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"Of course." Oh, but he was blessed. High-powered and beautiful, yet she was his faithful wife. "I'll hang on the minutes, as usual."

"I know you will. Bye-bye now, Jimmy dear."

She was gone. He heard the rhythmic click of her elegant feet on the stairs, then the various familiar sounds from the kitchen. She had a bowl of cereal before leaving, and there would just be time for him to get downstairs and kiss her again before she left. But he didn't feel like putting on a spurt. She would be turned off anyway, she'd been turned off when she said goodbye by the bed, and being Alma—his best beloved—she wouldn't turn herself on again until tomorrow night. When she did, though . . .

Contentedly, his mind aglitter with erotic reminiscence, Jimmy Crowther ambled across the landing to the bathroom.

The out-of-town branch of the London firm of solicitors in which Alma was a partner offered more small frustrations than usual on this particular weekly visit, and by half-past five she had had enough. Emma was unlikely to be in, and Peter rarely got home before seven, but when her weekly overnight stays in Dorking became regular they had given her a key to their house. Actually, it had been given to her and Jimmy, over Saturday lunch at the golf club, and with a renewed invitation to Jimmy to extend their foursome to a Wednesday night. So far, though, he hadn't got round to it. Her husband had grown more middle-aged than she had, Alma reflected, not for the first time, as she entered Peter and Emma's driveway. Less and less inclined to undertake activity that called for any effort or the least change of routine.

She parked outside the house, noting absently as she walked to the front door that Emma's garage was closed, as usual, to disguise the absence of her car.

Unless she hadn't yet gone out. . . .

But that would be highly unusual, and as soon as she entered the house and felt the totality of its silence, Alma knew it was empty. She took her small bag upstairs to the guest bedroom, smiling her approval of the sophistication on Emma's part which had her removing the coverlet and turning the sheet down on Alma's side of the bed each week.

As usual, again, Alma took her best nightie out of her bag and placed it on her pillow, took her sponge bag through into the *en suite* bathroom, changed her blouse and her shoes. Then she went downstairs, helped herself to a drink from the cupboard in the corner of the snug, and sat down with it to read Emma's *Daily Mail.*

She heard Peter's car as she drained her glass, and set it down before going out to the hall to welcome him.

"Hi!"

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"Hi! Oh, darling!"

As usual, they were instantly in each other's arms. As passionately glad to be together as they had been that first time almost three years ago. But passion that can be expressed only once a week has ample time to renew its intensity, and theirs was as intense as it had been at the start, that Wednesday night which had astounded them both when Emma had been called away to her sick mother.

"Peter! Oh, Peter! Every week seems longer than the last."

"We have Saturdays."

"We have Saturday torment. How do we manage not to give ourselves away?"

"We probably do, but Jimmy isn't looking."

"No. Jimmy doesn't look at anything much beyond his navel. Where he's implanted a miniature of me smiling a wifely smile. God, darling, but Jimmy's pleased with himself and his limited little life."

"Just as well." Holding her by the waist, he drew her back into the snug, kissed her again as he sat her in Emma's chair, then picked up her glass and went over to the corner cupboard. "He's never likely to suspect."

Watching her, he saw her shudder. "No. He trusts me. He loves me. He's a good man."

"Whom you married." Glass in hand, he dropped his long length to the floor by her chair and nestled his shoulders between her compliant legs. "Good as he is, why did you marry him?"

"He was kind. Like he still is. And generous. And he loved me. And I was on the rebound."

"Ah."

"He was a friend and he helped me through it."

"Not the best basis for marriage."

"I don't find him repulsive."

It was his turn to shudder. "Don't tell me that!"

"You don't find Emma repulsive. I accept that. And Jimmy gave me William and Sue."

"And trusts you blindly. Yes, I understand. And I'm fond of him, too. Sometimes . . . I feel bad every now and then that he's the odd one out, the only one of the four of us who doesn't know the way we live."

"So do I. But ignorance is bliss for Jimmy, darling. And how can he ever lose it? Was there ever such a foolproof way of being unfaithful?"

"Never." He twisted round between her knees, leaned up to kiss her. "Emma's left us a new recipe. It sounds good."

"It smells good, too. Emma's . . . all right, Peter?"

"I'd know if she wasn't."

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"Which means you and she are still okay."

He twisted round again, to look steadily and seriously into her eyes. "Yes."

She managed not to flinch. "And you're not living a lie. I envy you, Peter."

"Jimmy's all right, you've just told me. And I see it for myself every Saturday." He heaved himself to his feet. "Another drink, darling?"

"I'm ahead of you, I'll wait for the wine." Alma glanced at her watch. "And I'll ring Jimmy. It's his time."

Jimmy took a while to answer, and when he did he sounded strange and uncertain.

"Oh . . . Alma . . ."

Alma's heart was suddenly squeezed very small by two swooping grasps of alarm. But she managed to tell him lightly that he didn't sound quite himself.

"Oh, I'm all right, darling. It's just that . . . Well, I've got a visitor. Derek Wheatcroft, my new chief clerk—the cocky young chap I've been telling you about"—the parenthesis was a whisper—"is here having a drink with me." Alma wished her husband wasn't sounding so apologetic for so ridiculous a reason. It brought a quotation into her head, something about *a great gulf fixed* . . .

"That's fine, darling, I'm glad you aren't on your own on a Wednesday night, for once."

"I don't mind being on my own. He rather bulldozed me." The whisper again. The fussy, hissing sound irritated Alma. "I made the mistake of saying I was alone this evening, and he practically invited himself—"

She had to interrupt. "So, that's flattering from the younger generation. Enjoy yourself, my love. I'm sorry there isn't enough supper for two."

"I should say not!" her husband responded with swift indignation. "I'll offer him a second drink—which he's bound to accept—and then he can be on his way."

"He's not married, is he? You may have a job dislodging him."

"We'll see." He really shouldn't be sounding so grim about so trivial a task, Alma thought. But then, she shouldn't be so grimly anxious to bring her conversation with him to a close. "What are you doing, darling?"

"Oh, chatting with Emma while she puts the finishing touches to one of her specials. Peter's working in the shed as usual, on his boat. Better let you go now, darling, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Oh, yes, darling. See you tomorrow!"

Peter turned round from the drinks cupboard as she switched off. "So. Jimmy's entertaining?"

"Reluctantly. He's got his chief clerk from the bank there for a

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drink. I think it's great, but he's obviously not happy. I just hope he isn't being too old-womanish. If the young man wants to be friends, it can only be good for work relations."

"Don't think about it tonight." Peter crossed back to her chair, glanced at his watch, stood looking down at her. "Emma said the food would be at its best at eight. It's seven now . . . Shall we?"

Alma nodded without speaking and he helped her to her feet. Still in silence, they climbed the stairs side by side and crossed the landing to the guest bedroom.

Jimmy didn't know how Derek Wheatcroft had contrived to get him where he now found himself. In the last place on earth, he told himself angrily, that he wanted to be. Derek had described the place over their drinks at home as the best club in the Home Counties, but Jimmy was finding the repetitive, minimalist music too insistent, and the light flickering through the semi-darkness disagreeably disturbing. . . . And there was something about the women, and the men drinking with them at the few spaced tables in the gloom around him, that made him uneasy. Something baleful. Cold. Remote, even when he saw a woman at the nearest table put her hand on a man's arm. The movement had been too slow, too deliberate, to be any sort of warm or spontaneous gesture. Almost as if . . .

Alarm bells sounding, he started to get to his feet.

Now a hand was on *his* arm, but thank heaven it was only Derek's, and this gesture, at least, was unconsidered. "What is it, Jimmy?" He didn't remember giving his subordinate permission to use his first name. "Aren't you enjoying yourself?"

"These women . . ."

"Yes, if you wish." Jimmy saw the young man's eyes glitter in the small globe of light in the centre of their table. "But very high-class. Totally discreet. Some of them have to be for their own sakes, the middle-class housewives who need a safety valve. Shall we invite a couple of them for a drink? You don't have to carry it through."

Jimmy shuddered. "No, thank you. But don't let me inhibit *you,* Derek. I'll be on my way when I've finished my drink." The one thing he had managed to insist on, thank God, was that he come in his own car. So he was free to leave when he was ready. And he had been ready from the moment he had stepped through the curtained door and been enveloped by this strange, cold, predatory atmosphere. He hadn't known he was so weak, so easily persuaded.

"Pity." Derek Wheatcroft tapped the champagne bottle. "There's a lot still in here."

"All right, I'll stay for a fill-up." He hadn't been weak, he'd been

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thinking about life at the bank if he refused to go for a drink with his chief clerk, that was what had had him reluctantly trailing Derek Wheatcroft through the Surrey lanes, his irritation increasing when he realized their destination was Dorking—as he'd been forced out for the evening anyhow, he might as well have accepted Peter and Emma's invitation to join Alma at their house for the night, it would have been preferable to this nonsense.

He hadn't expected Derek's choice of place to be like this, but he mustn't turn tail, be so obviously chicken that the authority he had worked so steadily and hard for would be undermined. On a vision of sniggering youngsters and pitying looks, Jimmy Crowther smiled and raised his glass.

And over the rim of it saw something that made him clutch at his chest while his head seemed to explode in a cascade of fractured light.

"What is it, Jimmy?"

"Nothing. I just saw . . ." He'd played the hero's friend and confidante for years in the local dramatic society, for heaven's sake, he could still carry it off. His smile felt like a rictus, but he held it. "I think I must just have been affected by those swirling lights."

The young man chuckled. "The strobes. You'd have to be careful in a disco, Jimmy. Now, shall we have a pair of ladies over?"

"No! No," he repeated, less passionately. He had to be cunning. And the two glasses of champagne following the scotch he had had at home seemed to be sharpening him. "Leave it for the moment, please, Derek. So far as I'm concerned, at least. If you want to—"

"No, no. I'm happy to take my time." *And see more of my boss's sudden semi-capitulation.* Jimmy could see what Derek Wheatcroft was thinking as clearly as if the lad's head had been made of glass.

"Good." Jimmy took another mouthful of champagne, trying to sort out the whirl of implications in his head. Peter and Emma. Alma . . . He would sit there until the place closed, if necessary. Or go back in when he'd managed to shake off Derek.

But after a queasy half-hour in which they finished the bottle of champagne, Derek told his boss there was a woman he rather wanted to be alone with. "I haven't seen her here before"—Jimmy's heart leapt at the words, but sank again as Derek pointed the woman out—"and I like what I see. Mind if I disappear, sir?" Jimmy had to accept that the grin made the gentle mockery unexceptionable.

"Not at all." A tall, handsome woman was approaching their table, although Jimmy hadn't been aware of his companion making any sign. That was how it had been in his youth, he suddenly remembered, on a brief, bleak diminution of his rage: sitting in a public place with some workmates, noticing a pretty girl, and

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while he was wondering what he could do about it not noticing that one of his companions had exchanged secret signs with her until he saw them moving towards one another as if drawn by a magnet. "You go off, Derek my lad. I'll be on my way in a moment."

"Shame." But Derek, of course, didn't look surprised by Jimmy's announcement. Had he ever really expected his superior at the bank to disappear with one of these women?

The answer to that question didn't interest Jimmy. All that interested him was what he was going to do next, and he watched in relief as Derek and his choice disappeared behind the red curtain that hung across the far side of the room.

When they were out of sight he clicked his fingers at a waiter, a gesture he normally considered arrogant. "I'll have a double scotch, please. And tell me: Do the—ladies—have names?"

"Sure." The waiter, who was young and friendly, smiled at him encouragingly. "They have a table apiece, and the name goes with it. That one"—he nodded to the empty table nearest Jimmy's—"she's known as Ringtime. On account of long fingers and lots of rings. You see the sort of thing?"

"Sure," Jimmy echoed. "And that one?"

The waiter gave him a swift keen look. "That's Marilyn. I don't have to explain her name, do I?"

"No. That one?"

"Ah." The boy nodded understandingly. "General assessment of talent? That one's Wednesday. Only ever here on a Wednesday night."

"I see. Thanks."

If he hadn't been sitting down, he'd have fallen to the floor. As it was, he had to hold on to the table as his head exploded for the second time. The music, the steady, soft, sinister beat, seemed to be happening inside him, tapping relentlessly at his breastbone. Wednesday. Wednesday after Wednesday after Wednesday. *Emma in the kitchen preparing one of her specials . . . Peter working outside on his boat . . . Something nasty in the woodshed . . .*

The waiter brought his drink, and he paid the outrageous price he was asked for it. There was a man at her table, he was anticipating a long wait. But after a few moments he saw her get to her feet, put a finger on the man's lips as he turned a suppliant face up to her, and set out across the room in the direction of the cloakrooms. Downing his scotch at a gulp, he got up and followed her.

She was just short of the women's-room door when he caught up with her and took hold of her arm. He didn't know what he was going to say, but when she swung round, trying to shake her arm free, he heard his voice shout, "Wednesday!"

Emma looked at him with amazement that turned to shock.

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Then, under his angry glare, she said, "Oh, Jimmy!" and began to laugh.

"We've got to talk," he said, tightening his grip on her arm. "We'll go out to your car."

"But I've got—"

"No you haven't, Emma, not tonight." He had to have the worst, in so many words. "Come on."

When they were in her car she turned to him, smiling. "So," she said. "You've caught up with the three of us at last, Jimmy. We've been sorry for you, the only one not in the know, we've felt really bad, but there didn't seem to be anything we could do. And now you've done it yourself. Peter and Alma will be as relieved as I am, we hated deceiving you . . . Whatever is it?"

He was staring at her in horror. "But I wasn't . . . I didn't . . . I was just brought here for a drink by my chief clerk, I had no idea . . ." His voice cracked. "Emma, for God's sake tell me . . . Peter and Alma? Every Wednesday?"

"Oops!" she said. She had had quite a lot to drink. "So it's still poor Jimmy!" And she started to laugh again.

The sun through the thin curtains of the guest bedroom woke Peter early. For a few moments he watched Alma as she continued to sleep, touching the hair to each side of her face so gently he didn't wake her. But soon he was unable to resist a kiss, and then she sighed and stretched and leaned up and took him yet again into her arms.

When they were eventually lying quietly side by side, smiling at one another, Peter said he would make tea, and got out of bed and padded over to the bathroom, where he filled the kettle. When he had put it on, he went over to the window and drew back the curtains.

"It's a glorious morning. Set fair, I should say. Pity it's not Saturday and golf. I say!" He had brought his eyes down from the leafy horizon. "Emma's car's in the drive. I didn't hear her come in."

"Emma's the essence of discretion, darling."

Of sophistication, too. Neither of them was the least bit disconcerted by her return. Just very slightly puzzled, because normally Alma saw Emma only on a Saturday, or when they made specific dates.

"I know. But—it's odd."

Alma glanced at the bedside clock. "It's barely seven. She's probably asleep."

"Probably. But I think I'll just look in . . ." He was pulling on his dressing gown as he spoke, and with a swift smile towards the bed he left the room.

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He was back right away. "Bed's not slept in. She must just have arrived and be still downstairs. I'll go and see. . . ."

He stuck his feet into his slippers before leaving the room a second time. Feeling slightly put out by her lover's concern for his wife, Alma heard the flap of them on the stairs. Crossing the hall.

Then she heard a shout so hoarse and anguished she was out of bed on a reflex and struggling into her own dressing gown as she followed Peter down the stairs. The continuing sounds—sunk now to a steady moaning—led her into the sitting room.

Emma was sitting upright in her chair, and Peter was kneeling at her feet. The sitting-room curtains were heavier than the curtains in the guest bedroom, and through the gloom Alma couldn't think what was so upsetting Peter about his wife sitting at home in her usual chair. So she clicked on the overhead light, and then she too began to shout and then to moan.

Emma's face was mottled mauve and white, she was sticking her tongue out at Alma, and her eyes were wide and staring.

The police were hammering on the door before they had even got the binbag fastened. ●

"A FUN GUY RIGHT TILL THE END."

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Art by Ron Buccalo

HARMLESS OBSESSIONS

by Donald Olson

Like the neighboring houses on Rivington Place, most of them now multiple-family dwellings, the Watkins house struggled to preserve an air of genteel respectability. Peeling dark green paint did nothing to make it appear less forbidding, especially on rainy days, of which there had been a depressing number that summer.

From a dingy hallway, stairs led up to the Watkinses' living quarters, while double doors opened to the right into the studio, cluttered with photographic paraphernalia except for the far end where there was a dais and various props used in taking studio portraits.

Trevor Watkins sat hunched over a desk fiddling with one of his many cameras, a frown of concentration on his craggy, sallow face framed by limp gray-streaked blond hair.

He didn't look up when his wife Steffi came into the studio, shedding her raincoat and tossing it onto a chair. "I'm back," she said.

"Everything okay at Mrs. Birchwood's?" said Trevor incuriously.

"Of course. Why shouldn't it be? Trevor, we must call the police."

He still didn't look at her. "Don't tell me. You saw him again."

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"He was in the park, keeping pace with me as I walked along the sidewalk on this side of the street. It can't go on, you know. We must call the police."

"What good would that do?"

"There're laws against stalking."

The notion that she was being followed had taken hold of her several weeks ago. Trevor was sure it was all in her head. What reason would a stranger have to follow her? She was a perfectly ordinary-looking, somewhat overweight young woman with nothing at all striking about her except an abundance of copper-hued hair.

A nominee for the 2001 Anthony Award for best short story for "Don't Go Upstairs" (*EQMM* 8/'00), Donald Olson can always be depended upon to provide a surprising twist at the end of a story. Perhaps that explains why he has proved so popular with *EQMM* readers over the past thirty years. Last year he placed third in the *EQMM* Readers Award competition. ✝

"If you won't call them, I will," she said sharply, stung as usual by his bland indifference.

"Do so if it'll make you feel better."

And so she did. Her call brought to the house a burly, wheezy, gray-haired man in a dark suit who introduced himself as Detective Tom Jeffords.

"So tell me about this man, Mrs. Watkins. What makes you think he's following you about?"

"Because he's always there. Well, not always, but too often for it to be coincidence. I have this dear friend, Mrs. Birchwood, who lives in a big house in that cul-de-sac at the end of Rivington. I do things for her. Walk there, usually. Trevor has the car most of the time. This man is loitering in the park, watching me when I leave the house. He keeps to the other side of the street. I've never actually seen him in the cul-de-sac, but he's on the corner when I turn into Rivington coming home. He follows me. What more can I say?"

The detective turned to Trevor. "Have you seen this man, Mr. Watkins?"

"No."

Steffi flared up. "You! You never see anything except through a camera lens." Which, in a way, was not far from the truth.

The detective took out a notebook. "Description?"

Steffi frowned. "He looks—average." She giggled. "He looks a lot like Trevor. Wears dark pants, a leather jacket. Has glasses."

"He's never approached you? Tried to speak to you?"

"No."

Jeffords pocketed his notebook. "Well, all I can promise you, Mrs. Watkins, is that we'll have a patrol car keep an eye out. Really

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nothing else we can do. If he should threaten you, well, that's a different matter."

Steffi lowered her voice to a whisper. "Sometimes I worry it might have something to do with Little Jewel."

"Little Jewel?"

"Our daughter. She's seven. In school now."

"Does she walk to school? Play in the park?"

"We drive her to school. She's not allowed to play in the park."

As soon as they were alone Trevor said, "Why in hell did you mention Little Jewel?"

"Why not?"

"Steffi, I think it's time this nonsense stopped."

"Just because she's not like other little girls—"

"To put it mildly," he said drily.

Two days later the phone calls began, anonymous calls. No one there when Trevor or Steffi picked up the phone.

"It's him," Steffi insisted. "It has to be."

"There you go again."

"You never take anything I say seriously."

A call to the police accomplished nothing. Steffi continued to report sightings of the stranger—the stalker, as she called him. Still, it didn't prevent her from going every day to Mrs. Birchwood's. One might almost have thought she wanted the stranger to approach her, even threaten her, if that's what it would take to have people believe her.

Trevor had met Mrs. Birchwood only once. She had come to the studio to have a passport picture taken prior to a trip abroad. She was a handsome, soberly dressed widow with an imperious manner. Trevor, claiming professional insight, spoke of her later as being a stuck-up old battle-axe with a hardboiled elegance and "something funny about her." Steffi said this was cruel and unjust. She herself was most impressed by the woman.

Steffi had delivered the pictures along with a studio portrait Mrs. Birchwood had ordered after admiring Trevor's work. The widow, who was childless, had taken a liking to Steffi for some reason, and began inviting her to tea. Steffi said it was because she was lonely and friendless. She gave Steffi little presents, one of them an emerald brooch she said was a family heirloom. Trevor thought the widow must be very lonely indeed to find Steffi such good company.

A couple of weeks after Steffi first complained to the police about the stranger, there was a break-in at night at the studio. It was not until the next morning that Trevor made the discovery. The flimsy lock on the back door had been forced. So far as he and Steffi could determine, nothing had been taken except two of Trevor's cameras and a silver-framed picture of Little Jewel which had stood on the mantel.

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Detective Jeffords and a uniformed officer arrived in response to Steffi's somewhat hysterical phone call.

"They obviously didn't know the value of some of my equipment," Trevor told them. "The two cameras they took were only moderately expensive."

"And you're sure nothing else was taken?"

Trevor shot Steffi a warning glance. "Quite sure."

"I hope you believe me now," said Steffi, "about my being followed."

The policeman questioned the likelihood of there being any connection.

"But what about the phone calls?"

"You said you never got any at night, when someone would more likely have been checking to see if you were away from home."

Jeffords could offer little hope of recovering the stolen cameras, although the usual procedures would be followed. He suggested they install better locks.

"Well, that was a waste of time," grumbled Steffi when they were alone.

"At least you knew enough not to mention the photograph. That silver frame was probably worth as much as one of the cameras."

"You might know I wouldn't mention that."

"You tell too many people. You're getting reckless."

"There's no harm in mentioning Little Jewel to a supermarket checker or virtual strangers."

Little Jewel had come into their lives, so to speak, five years earlier, when a woman had brought her little girl to have her photograph taken. A couple of days later both mother and daughter were killed in a car crash. The pictures were never picked up.

Months later Steffi removed them from the file and was struck again by the almost unearthly beauty of the little girl, with her golden curls and big blue eyes. In the photograph she was cuddling a teddy bear.

One day Steffi came home with a seemingly identical teddy bear. "She's ours now," she said, her face aglow.

"We don't need a teddy bear. Kids bring their own."

"I mean Little Jewel." Which was the name Steffi had given to the girl in the photograph. "She's ours now. Just what we need to be a family."

"We are a family," said Trevor.

Steffi gave him a withering look. "We're married. We live together. We're not a family."

Steffi insisted Trevor make several prints of the photograph, including an enlargement for which she bought an antique sterling silver frame. Trevor thought it best to humor Steffi. What harm was there in pretending they had a child named Little Jewel? It was only a game.

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Trevor had to admit there was little in Steffi's life to bring her satisfaction, which probably accounted for her increasing restlessness and tendency to make believe. They had few friends, rarely socialized, seldom went out, and their love life was nothing to write songs about. Trevor felt a mild sense of guilt. His professional life was all the satisfaction he needed. He assumed they would go on as they were for the rest of their lives.

So he let her have her Little Jewel and her fantasy of being a mother. And he was happy that she had formed an increasingly intimate relationship with Mrs. Birchwood, who had acquired an importance in Steffi's life even greater than Little Jewel's. That Mrs. Birchwood not only liked her but doted on her, rather as if Steffi were the child she'd never had, appeared to give Steffi a purpose her life had lacked. Although it was at times inconvenient when Steffi demanded use of the car to take Mrs. Birchwood, who didn't drive, on errands.

"She ought to be paying you for all you do," Trevor once ventured to remark. "She's rich enough."

Steffi's response was an inscrutable smile. "She does pay me, in ways more important than money. But you wouldn't understand that."

Nothing further was heard from the police. By now Trevor had no doubt whatsoever that the stalker was no more real than Little Jewel, though he was prudent enough to keep his mouth shut. If her obsessions remained harmless, let Steffi enjoy them.

Toward the end of September, Steffi announced that Mrs. Birchwood was traveling to the West Coast to spend a couple of months with an old friend who was dying of some rare disease.

"She said I'd be doing her a great favor," said Steffi, "if I would look after her house. Stay there, I mean."

"I hope you told her it was out of the question," Trevor replied.

"I told her I'd discuss it with you."

"You know I couldn't manage without you that long." Which wasn't strictly true, but he was getting rather fed up with this Mrs. Birchwood business. "You can water her plants and feed her cat and take in her mail without living there. You've done that before. Besides," he added jestingly, "Little Jewel needs you."

Steffi appeared to take this seriously. "Well, there is that, of course."

"Does Mrs. Birchwood know about Little Jewel?"

"Not exactly. I did tell her we had a daughter who was killed by a drunk driver."

"And remember," he said, "I'll be off to that photographer's convention in Toronto for a week in October. You'll have to be here then."

The subject was not revived. Life remained as uneventfully dull as ever. Trevor had his work to keep him busy. Steffi spent at least

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three hours a day with Mrs. Birchwood. During this period, when the weather turned sharply cooler and seemingly endless rain dulled the colors starting to show up on the trees in the park across the street, Steffi seldom mentioned the stalker. Had the weather, Trevor mused sardonically, driven him off the streets and out of the park?

Something unexpected happened the day Trevor was to leave for Toronto. He was alone in the studio while Steffi spent the afternoon at Mrs. Birchwood's, the widow having departed for the West Coast, when Detective Jefford phoned. "I thought you'd like to know we've recovered your stolen cameras."

"You mean you caught the thief?"

"No, but our canvassing of all the pawn shops in the area paid off. Someone hocked the cameras at a shop on the East Side. The person gave a phony name and address, of course."

"So no chance of identifying him?"

"Her, actually," said Jeffords. "A female pawned the cameras. Pawnbroker gave us a pretty good description. Thirtyish, full-figured, red hair." Jeffords chuckled. "He might almost have been describing your wife."

"Very funny."

"You'd better not tell her, she might not think so."

"You bet I'll tell her. After all, didn't she say her stalker looked like *me?*"

Trevor was too busy to give much thought to this exchange, although it remained at the back of his mind. When the rain showed no sign of letting up, he decided to close the studio and pick Steffi up in the car so she wouldn't have to walk home. After all, she wouldn't be seeing him for a week. It wouldn't hurt him to make the gesture. And he was eager to give her the news about the cameras.

It was only a ten-minute drive to the upscale neighborhood where Mrs. Birchwood lived. Her Tudor-style brick house stood in regal isolation at the far end of the cul-de-sac. To Trevor it appeared as impregnable as a fortress, with many of its shutters tight shut, its glass-brick basement windows heavily barred. A house to discourage burglars and the unwelcome.

Steffi, at that moment, was upstairs in Mrs. Birchwood's lavish bedroom admiring herself in an antique pier glass. She was wearing one of the widow's designer dresses and a string of the widow's pearls. It was not the first time she had amused herself in this way during her friend's absences, playacting the part of being the lady of the house. As someday she would be. Mrs. Birchwood had promised.

The nearby sound of a car door slamming startled her, brought her to the window. Trevor's car! The pelting rain should have told her why he was there, yet she felt nothing but an unreasonable surge of anger. Trevor had no business being here.

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She quietly stole downstairs, and was on the bottom step when the doorbell rang. She froze, overcome by a panic she lacked the power to analyze, a sense of imminent peril. She had no intention of opening the door. This was *her* world, not Trevor's.

The bell kept ringing. Like a child, she felt an unaccountable need to hide, to conceal herself until Trevor gave up and went away. Just as unaccountably and without forethought, as if to arm herself against an intruder, she crept into the dining room and picked up a heavy silver candlestick from the sideboard. But where to hide? Where to hide?

When there was no response to his repeated ringing of the doorbell, Trevor looked around, uncertain what to do next. Steffi had to be there. He would have passed her on the way if she'd been walking home. He gripped the doorknob and turned it. The door swung open. Steffi had to be there if the door was unlocked.

He called her name as he stepped across the threshold into the hall. No sound except the ticking of a grandfather clock in an alcove at the foot of the stairs. He moved to peer into the spacious living room, then crossed the hall into the dining room. A door from there opened into what was clearly a library-study. He paused, eyes circling the room, lighting on a rosewood desk and a gleam of silver. Trevor moved closer. Not until he was near enough to touch it did he register the fact that he was looking at the silver-framed picture of Little Jewel.

Suddenly nothing made sense. He stood there, bewildered. The phone call from the detective instantly acquired a frightening significance. A woman had pawned the cameras, a woman closely resembling his wife. The idea was madness.

He glanced down at a pile of letters and circulars. The top letter pricked his curiosity. He picked it up. The envelope, in a bold, aggressive handwriting, was addressed to Steffi, care of Birchwood. Trevor slid the letter from the envelope and hastily scanned it.

If the picture of Little Jewel had jolted him, the words he read produced an even more violent shock. He jammed the letter into his pocket and hurried from the room, craving fresh air as if he'd been trapped in a mausoleum, airless and fetid. Before he reached the door he thought he heard a whimpering sound coming from somewhere at the back of the house.

"Steffi . . . ?" There was no answer.

Trevor padded down the hall and into the kitchen. A big ginger cat was scratching at the basement door, which was slightly ajar, trying to pry it open with its paw. Trevor opened the door. The cat scooted through. Trevor shut the door behind it and fled from the house.

Not until he reached home, where there was no sign of Steffi, and where he paused long enough to pour himself a stiff drink, did

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he pull the letter from his pocket and reread the lines that had left him so shaken.

. . . and so, my child, the rest is up to you. I've done what I could to help, if only by making the phone calls. I shall confirm what you tell the police, that I lent you the gun to protect yourself from the stalker. They'll have no reason to disbelieve your story that you mistook T. for an intruder. You'll be free, my child, my own Little Jewel. We can be together.

Trevor felt as if a breath of something rankly evil emanated from the scented notepaper in his hand. How had it all begun? When did they begin spinning this web of madness?

Trevor found the gun hidden beneath a pile of lingerie in the top drawer of Steffi's bureau. He carried it outside and buried it in the back garden. After that he took a hot shower, dressed, and proceeded to pack his bag for the trip to Toronto. By the time he was ready to leave, Steffi still hadn't returned. He left her a brief note.

Steffi, Don't bother looking for the gun. We'll talk when I get back. Trevor

Picturing her reaction when she read the note filled him with malicious amusement.

When he returned from Toronto he found no sign of Steffi having been in the house. His note still lay on the kitchen table. He was certain now that she must have been in the Birchwood house when he went to look for her, and she must have realized what he'd discovered. He felt curiously indifferent as to where she'd gone. Perhaps to join her fellow conspirator, her would-be accomplice. He felt not the slightest impulse to contact the police. He wanted only to be left undisturbed in his own private world, a world of which Steffi had never really been a part.

At the end of two months Iris Birchwood returned to discover, much to her annoyance, that the front door to her home was unlocked. Her first thought, that Steffi must be there, proved mistaken. Her second discovery was that all the houseplants were dead.

Not until she was unpacked did she go into the kitchen and put the kettle on for a cup of tea, after which she would call Steffi and demand an explanation. The cat's bowls stood dry and empty on the floor. But where was pussy? Mousing in the basement? She turned the latch and opened the door, which, as a precaution against burglars, could not be unlocked from the other side without the key hidden in the wine cellar.

She first became aware of the odor, and then of what for only an instant, in the dim light, she took to be the ginger cat curled up on the top step. Then she realized, sickening at the sight, that it was not the cat but a mass of copper-red hair. ●

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MEXICAN GATSBY

by Raymond Steiber

Old lovers often put new obligations on you, and that was why I found myself on the balcony of a hotel in Cabo San Mateo with a telephone in my hand, pulling my final weight for Dinah Turney.

Cabo San Mateo was divided into two distinct parts, and I could see both of them from where I was sitting. The new town with its glass-fronted hotels and well-groomed beaches and the old town with its crowded-together fishing boats and tile-roofed houses, the two of them separated by a broad Pacific bay.

There was a third town up in the hills above the cape, a place where there were wide puddles in the mud streets after any rain and always a smell of garbage in the air.

It provided the town with its cleaning ladies and waiters and pool attendants and lawn boys. Its petty thieves and prostitutes as well. Cabo San Mateo needed all of them in order to operate.

The man on the other end of the telephone didn't want to talk to me. But then why should some narco-gangster's flunky want to talk to somebody from the States who might turn out to be a DEA agent? So I played my trump card and told him what I was and the buzzer went off as it always does—in big-city bars, in small towns, wherever people like me find themselves in the course of business, people who are plugged in to the great Dream Machine and can deliver some part of what it has to offer.

He told me to hold on and went off to confer with someone. Then he came back and asked for credentials.

I gave him the names of some people he could call in L.A. Then I

In July of last year, Raymond Steiber, a frequent contributor to *EQMM* over the past decade, died in Cary, North Carolina. Like *EQMM* authors Clark Howard and Doug Allyn, Raymond Steiber most often worked on a large canvas, combining elements of adventure, crime, and even espionage with mystery: His settings often ranged over continents. He will be deeply missed: We are fortunate in having two more of his stories in inventory. †

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added the titles of some pictures. *Nightmare City, Gangster, Hurry the Night.*

It was *Gangster* that turned the trick and got me in to see Felipe Cruz. He'd seen that one. But then what would you expect of some narco-gangster's gofer?

Cruz's villa was located out toward the end of the cape. There were a lot of big houses out there, fitted this way and that into the natural contours in order to provide maximum privacy on a minimum of land.

A couple of guards with pockmarked faces stopped my cab at the wrought-iron gate. They wore black pants and tailless shirts that hung outside their trousers. The shirts were meant to conceal the pistols they carried, but the material was so thin that you could see them anyway.

The short brick drive curved through a dense growth of flowering plants and delivered me to a modern white villa with a red tile roof. I paid off the driver, and a young girl took me through the cool, sparsely furnished interior to the pool out back.

It was nicely set against the greenery there, a transparent jewel with the villa on one side of it and a gently sloping hill on the other. There was another Shirt out there with his barely concealed weapon and a fat guy stretched out on a lounger, and finally Cruz himself—or a man I took to be Cruz: a young barechested hoodlum sitting in the shade of an umbrella.

The girl took me over, and I introduced myself.

"I'm Mike Bergman," I said.

For a moment he eyed me morosely, then he gave a nod. "Sit down."

He was decently built with a smooth, hairless chest. There was nothing special about the face except the eyes, which were somewhat feminine. Or maybe feline would be a better word. There were a dozen *mestizos* just like him in every village between here and San Diego, and yet there was something that marked him out, too. In my business it's called presence, and if you've got it, you can go a long way.

He watched me impassively.

"So what do you want me for? A movie?"

The fat guy laughed sneeringly without raising his head.

"I flew down here to see Kristel Turney."

"Maybe he wants her for a movie," the fat guy said.

"Shut up, Justo."

His eyes turned back to me. I wondered if I was supposed to be afraid of him. I didn't feel afraid, but maybe it was the setting.

"I'm a friend of Kristel's mother," I said. "She passed away at

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Cedars of Lebanon last week. Her last request was that I come down here and see that her daughter was all right."

"Don't you expect her to be?"

"I don't expect anything. I'm here to carry out a mission for a dear friend. When it's done, I go back where I came from. Haven't you ever had obligations like that?"

He seemed to think it over.

After a moment he said: "She's upstairs taking a siesta."

"I can wait. Or I can come back later."

"Or you can just stay away, movie man," Fat Boy said.

Cruz motioned for the girl, then sent her to wake Kristel.

"This is a nice place," I said to make conversation.

"Money buys you anything," Cruz said.

"Sure. But it doesn't have to buy you things that are any good."

"I needed a place, and it was on the market. What does a movie producer do?"

"He's the guy who makes the picture happen in spite of the best efforts of the actors, the director, and the moneymen to see that it doesn't."

"That's what I do, too. I make things happen, even when people don't want it that way." A twenty-five-, twenty-six-year-old with that sure undercurrent of menace someone that age can have. Yes, I guess he did make things happen.

"Jorge saw this movie of yours. *Gangster.*"

It had been a story about an inner-city gang facing off against the Mob. We'd used a rap star for the lead, and he'd been so intimidated by the responsibility that he'd tried to bluster his way through the part instead of giving a perfomance. The director and I had had to stay on him every minute, but even so he'd half-ruined the picture. I looked at the rough cut and thought how good it could've been if he'd just relaxed and played himself. Still, it'd had enough shootouts and explosions to make money, and certainly enough to satisfy some dimwit Third World narco-crook.

"How do you make a movie like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"How do you set it up?"

That was the thing all right, particularly if you were an independent like me. Basically you found a property and costed it out and then shopped it around. It routinely took months, even years, to get something off the ground. And even then it could all fall apart on you. Interesting the young rapper and then signing him on had made the difference with *Gangster.* And then, of course, we were stuck with him.

I told Cruz about it. It was less simple than sticking a gun in somebody's face, but the object was about the same. Get the thing done.

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About the time I finished, Kristel showed up.

She was the archetypical California blonde and nothing like her mother, who'd been dark and voluptuous. Long legs, long hair, and just enough curves to make her interesting without robbing her of her nymphet quality. She was twenty and so American-looking that you'd never take her for anything else. You could see why Cruz had been drawn to her. She was the babe he'd been seeing all his young life in the movies and on TV and who a kid like him would never have a chance at. But then the narco-money had started pouring in, and like a fancy car or this villa, she'd suddenly become available to him.

And as for her—a young hoodlum like him exuding equal amounts of danger and sex appeal—well, write your own scenario. I'd certainly had a hand in enough like that.

I got her off around the other side of the pool where I could talk with her privately. She wore a tank top and cutoffs and sandals. Here and there her perfect skin was marred by strings of mosquito bites.

I said: "You know your mother's gone."

She played with a strand of hair. "I heard about it," she said indifferently.

They hadn't been close for three or four years, and then with all her health problems Dinah had just given up on Kristel. And as for her father, he'd faded out of the picture so long ago that nobody even remembered what he'd looked like.

"Before she passed, she asked me to come down here and see how you were doing. She was worried about you."

"You're not going to give me a big lecture, are you? Because I'm too old for that crap now."

"No. But maybe you ought to stop a moment and look where you're going."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I mean, think, Kristel. These are gangsters you're mixed up with."

"So what about the sharks you swim with in your business? What about you? How're any of you any better?"

"Maybe we're not, ethically speaking. But nobody I know's ever cut anybody's liver out over a movie deal gone bad. There's a difference between being a hustler and a killer."

"I don't see any difference."

That was the way it went. She'd drifted down here and got mixed up with Cruz and that was how it would go on—for now, anyway—until she got bored with it and moved on. Or, more likely, Cruz grew bored with her. And as for me, I was too old to matter. For God's sake, I'd been around so long I'd actually slept with her *mother*. What did I know about anything?

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I pushed it far enough to feel I'd met my obligation, then let it go.

"It's your life, Kristel. But look—if you're ever in a jam, call me and I'll be there for you."

I wrote my unlisted number on the back of a business card and tucked it in a pocket of her cutoffs. Then I walked around the pool to take my leave of Cruz.

I asked about calling a cab.

"No problem. Jorge will drive you. Hey, we're eating in town tonight. You come along with us. This place we're going is good."

Well, why not? I'd made enough movies about gangsters. I might as well break bread with one. I nodded my assent, and Jorge, who was one of the Shirts, drove me back to town. The vehicle was a black Grand Cherokee with tinted glass all around—which in Mexico is as much a mark of the narco-gangster as his cold eyes or his MAC-10 machine pistol.

I took a cab to the restaurant. It was a new place that sat out over the water, and the weather was just right for us to sit on a covered terrace while overhead fans stirred the breeze.

Kristel was there in a white dress that flowed off her left shoulder and across her young breasts and showed off her perfect tan. She sat next to Cruz, which meant that I had to sit next to Fat Boy, who, it turned out, was Cruz's cousin. The rest of the party was made up of Shirts.

Cruz and Fat Boy were wearing so many rings and medallions that when they picked up a fork you expected them to clank. But I'd seen as bad in movie people. The difference was that in these guys it was a display of power, not wealth, and a dangerous power at that. Rattlers came in bright colors and so did Latin American hoodlums.

The seafood menu was good, the talk mainly stupid and boring, about fifty notches below what you'd hear in your average sports bar. That was something the movies, including my own, always got wrong. We have smart writers put clever lines in the mouths of men who in real life are only brutal and banal. Then the hoodlums ape the lines back to us because it's cool and that's the way they think they ought to talk. Sometimes you wonder if that's all they ape. How many real-life killings go down because that's the way the Corleones would do it or those guys in *Goodfellas.*

Kristel said virtually nothing. This was the boys' table and she was just there for decoration—to show off that Cruz was important enough to have somebody like her. If it bothered her, she didn't let on, and I wondered just what sort of story was playing in her head. Not the one that was going on around her, that was for sure.

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The food got cleared away, and Cruz said: "If I wanted to make a movie, here in Mexico, what would it cost?'

"It would depend on the script. Also what sort of production values you went for and the type of cast. And where you intended to distribute it, Latin America or U.S.A. and the world."

"But it'd be cheaper here—right?"

"Maybe."

"I want to make a movie. I want to make the movie of my life. Like this *Gangster* of yours."

I didn't blink an eye. Everybody you met wanted to make a movie. Every shoe clerk and postal worker and waitress had a script tucked away somewhere. And they all seemed to buttonhole me.

"I got money I could put up," Cruz said. "And I got friends who could put up more."

I shook my head. "Don't get mad, but no U.S. producer would touch your money. The Feds'd make it look like money laundering and seize all his assets and the next thing he knew he'd be in bankruptcy court. You could maybe find some Latin American producer."

"I want it in English. I want it Hollywood."

Like the fancy car. Like the California blonde. That was how you validated yourself. That was how you proved you'd made the big time.

"We'll talk about this some more," Cruz said. "You come out on my boat tomorrow. Catch some fish. See what you think when I tell you some things."

So I agreed to that. In the end I agreed to a lot of things.

He had a pretty good story to tell the next afternoon on his boat, and he continued it that evening over food and drinks at the villa. You had to fish for the details because he didn't understand any of that, how it was the little stuff that made a movie work, Alec Guinness's walk in those le Carré things which he picked up from watching real-life spymaster Maurice Oldfield, the business about the blueberries in *Casino.* But the stuff was there, all right. The frightened birdlike look in Fernando Gomez's eyes when his luck had finally run out. The way the young hoodlum had burst into tears when they came to kill him, and how later his brother had begged Cruz to lie and tell everybody he'd gone out like a man. The *loco* Jimenez brothers who were so ruthlessly violent that they eliminated entire families, and how in the end, for everybody's mutual safety, they'd had to be exterminated themselves.

I began to see the shape of a possible screenplay and the larger-than-life characters who would inhabit it. It got me a little excited—which is what you need if you're ever going to get a pic-

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ture off the ground. But where would I find somebody to play Cruz? Today's young actors were all soft at the center. They couldn't project believable levels of toughness like the actors of an earlier generation could—Cagney, for instance, who'd been raised on the meaner streets of New York, or Lee Marvin, who'd been hardened in the crucible of war. And they didn't have the acting skills of a De Niro or an Al Pacino.

It had been Fat Boy—Justo—who'd plucked Cruz off a village street and got him on with the Gomez organization. Gomez was a mid-level narco-gangster who owed allegiance to the Jimenez brothers, who ran everything up north.

They owned cops, parts of the military, government officials, even some U.S. customs agents. Anybody who got in their way ended up in the Tijuana city dump where the wild dogs of the place feasted on their bodies. They ruled by terror and were virtually untouchable.

Cruz had a reputation as a tough, and had been hired as an enforcer. His first kill had been the boy who'd cried, and in my mind I saw how it would play on the screen—as if it were only fodder for a movie and not something that had really happened.

Then, a year later, he'd been given the job of killing Gomez himself as part of a power play against the Jimenez brothers—his boss, his own *patron.* I fit that into the arch of the screenplay as well, matching it with the first killing.

Eventually, as the war with the Jimenez brothers had continued, he'd taken Gomez's place. The finish had come at an abandoned mine when the brothers had been shot down and pitched, still breathing, into the depths. Cruz hadn't been in on that—that had been strictly a Tijuana affair—but in my movie he would be.

And now he was almost respectable—a big-time narco-gangster who no longer dirtied his hands with actual killings and seldom had to order one. And in five years, in seven years, he'd be more respectable still—a man known for his investments and real estate holdings and a colorful past.

Except that he wouldn't. He was just a killer who'd got lucky and someday would get unlucky and didn't have, as others might have, that part in him that would avoid it. And that was grist for my movie, too.

In the end we came to an agreement. He'd supply the details and I'd put together a project based on his life story. But there'd be no money involvement. I'd raise the cash the way I always did, by begging it from moneymen who wouldn't know a good movie if it came up and bit them on the knee.

We shook hands on it, and afterwards Fat Boy walked me to the door.

"You know who he wants for the lead in the movie."

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"Tell me."

"Himself."

I thought about the troubles I'd had with the rap artist. "I don't think so, Justo."

"He'll do it if he wants to. And you'll like it, too, movie man."

Then he laughed in that sneering fashion of his and left me there in the dark.

I brought in Brian Singer to do the treatment. He was an old pro. He'd know how to shape the thing. We set up shop in my hotel in Cabo San Mateo and spent four or five evenings or afternoons a week out at the villa. Singer asked Cruz a lot of to-the-point questions about Gomez and the Jimenez brothers. Cruz had, in fact, never met them in the flesh but he knew plenty about them. Cruz didn't like Singer until Brian began showing him how certain scenes would play on the screen. Then he began seeing him as a necessary evil.

One night on the way back to the hotel Brian said: "You're going to have trouble with this guy when he sees the final draft of the treatment. He'll start acting like the worst pampered star you ever ran into, except that a star can only get you fired off the picture whereas this guy can kill you."

"I already thought about that. That's why there're going to be two treatments. One he likes and one we actually go to bat with. Don't worry. I'll do the dog work on the treatment he sees."

"What happens when he sees the movie?"

"I'll be in Los Angeles and he'll be here and I'll write him a note lamenting all the changes the distributors forced on us."

"The other thing we need is a finish for this thing, and right now I can't think of anything with any punch."

"We'll get to it. One thing, I don't want your standard machine-gun gangster climax."

"That's what the distributorship want. And remember, Mike, you still got to bring a director in on this thing. I mean, this isn't the nineteen forties. You aren't Daryl F. Zanuck with absolute control over what gets shot."

"Too goddam bad, too," I said.

Spending a lot of time with Cruz also meant spending time with Kristel. Not that we got any closer. She was more inclined to hang out with the Shirts, the Mexican guys, than with Brian and me. But then they were her age, they were inclined to indulge in the same sort of horseplay around the pool. Although sometimes I wondered if that horseplay didn't have an element of playacting about it, if it wasn't just a way of drawing a line, with Brian and me on one side of it and her on the other.

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Once, when Brian and I were waiting outside, we heard her and Cruz arguing in the villa. What surprised me was that it was her voice that dominated. That was unexpected—it suggested things about her that I hadn't yet noticed. Abruptly the argument ceased, and a few minutes later Cruz came striding out of the villa and we started our session. Then, about halfway through it, Kristel appeared. She had finger marks on her throat and a swollen nose.

Cruz gazed at me through half-closed eyes. Fat Boy watched, too, with a smirk on his face. He was waiting to see which way I'd go. Whether I'd play the coward and ignore Kristel's condition or try to take her aside and find out what had happened. Either way I'd lose, and that was what Fat Boy particularly wanted to see. It would make his day.

But Kristel spoiled it for him by coming over and leaning on Cruz's chair and allowing him to slide his arm around her hip. All the while she stared at me with her gray California eyes and dared me to interfere. But I wasn't playing that game. I'd only help her if she asked for help.

Little by little, and mostly thanks to Jorge, we found out what the fight had been about. There were a pair of sisters Cruz kept in an apartment in the old part of town, and once or twice a week he'd spend an afternoon, an evening, or an entire night with them, sometimes taking Fat Boy along.

He had a brothel he liked to visit, too. Tia Anita's. He and Justo and the Shirts would descend on it *en masse* and party with the whores till dawn. When he returned to the villa, it was usually to find his fancy shirts cut up with a pair of scissors and his handmade shoes floating around in the pool. Then, from what we heard, he'd smack Kristel around and throw her in the pool with the shoes and keep her there half the morning, shoving his bare foot in her face every time she tried to climb out.

And yet, despite the violence, there was apparently something theatrical about it, too—as if each of them was playing a role for the benefit of the Shirts and enjoying it immensely even as they screamed and threatened and sobbed.

"This is great stuff," Brian said. "You can't *buy* this kind of stuff. It'll play big on the screen."

But, remembering Dinah, I wasn't sure I wanted to use Kristel in that way. Then I thought: She'll probably like it. And once he calms down, Cruz'll probably like it, too.

Finally Brian had his treatment, and I had my Trojan Horse treatment as well. We went out to the villa to lay it at the feet of Cruz.

I explained to him what a treatment was.

"It's a super-detailed outline with most of the big scenes sketched in. It's sort of like a rough blueprint for the picture."

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I'd had a local bind it for me in leather covers, and now I handed it to Cruz. We were in the living room for a change, and the afternoon light came softly through the broad windows.

I expected Cruz to open the treatment and begin paging through it. But he just sat there staring at me malevolently as if I'd deliberately shamed or insulted him. Then I realized what it was. The bastard was an illiterate.

He said: "Justo, come over and read this aloud to us."

"I'll do it if you want," I said.

"No. Justo does it. Justo has a fine voice."

So Fat Boy picked up the treatment and spent the next hour stumbling through it in fractured English, and all the while Cruz stared at Brian and me across the coffee table. He was waiting for us to begin sniggering at Justo's reading—which also would have been to snigger at him. Hoping, almost, that we'd do it so he could call in the Shirts and show us who was master here—and never mind who could read and write. Never mind who was able to operate in the larger world where words counted for more than pistols.

Justo finished, and Cruz just sat there.

Seething, I thought.

Then he gave a signal.

"Take these two back to their hotel."

In the back of the car, Brian said: "I don't think he liked your treatment, Mike."

"I tried to make it too much like a real one. And then he was mad as hell because we figured out he can't read. It's like we spit on him."

Just after dark, Justo showed up at the hotel. He smelled of booze and had a sheaf of scrawled notes in his hand.

After we'd left, Cruz had gone into a rage, punching the walls and kicking furniture around. Then he'd calmed down, outwardly, at any rate, and gathered up everybody but Kristel and headed for that brothel he liked. But while they all partied, he'd sat and brooded. Finally he'd grabbed Justo and taken him to one side and begun dictating to him. They'll put this in the movie and that, and they'll show me in this way. And you'll go tell them to do it.

The notes didn't make any sense, even when I had Justo read them aloud.

"I'm going back to Tia Anita's."

"No you're not, Justo. You're going to sit right here and the two of us are going to work these notes out and put together just what Felipe wants."

"You going to make me, movie man?"

"You're goddam right I'm going to make you. Unless you want to have a falling-out with that cousin of yours."

He told me several obscene things he'd like to do with my

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mother, but he stayed anyway and we worked on it till past midnight. When he left, he had a funny look in his eyes—as if he'd never seen me before. What he'd really never seen was a producer dragging out the heavy artillery to save a film project.

I banged out a new Trojan Horse treatment. It was stupid and illiterate and utterly unfilmable, but it would hold Cruz until Brian and I could get out of town, and that was all I wanted.

I called the villa and told the Shirt who answered that we'd be out that evening to show Cruz the new material. The Shirt sounded hungover. If that was all he took away from the type of place I imagined Tia Anita's to be, he could count himself lucky.

As we rode out, Brian read the juicier parts of the treatment and laughed.

"You got no shame, Mike."

"I'm in the movie business. What do you expect?"

Cruz was waiting for us at poolside. He wore a pale yellow blazer and a dark blue shirt open at the neck and pants to match. He looked unshaven—or maybe partially shaven would be more accurate—as if he'd taken the best shot at it he could manage. I noticed that there were a couple of broken windows on the second floor of the villa—Kristel's reaction, presumably, to last night's binge at Tia Anita's.

"I'll read it," I said. "It'll save time."

Cruz eyed me morosely. He was prepared to like this treatment as little as he'd liked the last. What he'd do about it probably depended on how hungover he still was.

I'd pitched dozens of film ideas. I'd pitched them to moneymen and studio production chiefs and A-list movie stars. You gauged your audience and presented your material accordingly, dumb or smart, using every trick at your command. You wanted that yes, that green light, even if it was only a temporary green light, the head nod that kept the project alive and moved it along to the next step.

I gave Cruz all of it. All the purples and reds. I pumped up the lead role because that pumped him up, too. I made a narco-gangster's wet dream out of it, full of power and cruelty and greed and self-love. It was like a parody of everything Cruz was in reality, but all he'd see would be the bright colors and himself as a kind of movie god.

It was the most cynical performance I've ever given in my life—and I'm a guy who'd set new records in that department. Every once in a while I'd catch a glimpse of Brian out of the corner of my eye and see that he had a frozen smile on his face. I knew what he was thinking. No way this guy's going to swallow this. He'll have his buddies beat the hell out of us.

But I knew better than that. I knew that I had Cruz—that he

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was eating it up. Toward the end, he couldn't even sit still anymore. He was up on his feet, strutting around with excitement.

When I finished, he rushed over and gave me a bear hug.

His eyes were bright.

"You know there is only one man who can be in this movie, Mike."

"Sure. But that's going to be a tough sell to the moneymen. They'll want somebody like Pacino."

"Pacino's too old. And who can play Felipe Cruz like Felipe Cruz can play him?"

"I think you'd be good, Felipe. I think it'd be something special."

"Then you must make it happen, Mike."

"Brian and I are flying out early tomorrow morning. Don't expect any news for a while. It takes time to get these things off the ground. Months, maybe a year or more."

"With this thing you read me? Are these people stupid? Maybe I should come and talk to them."

But he wouldn't. The minute he crossed the border, the DEA would bring him down like a jacklighted deer. He wasn't protected in the U.S., he didn't have a wall of *mordida* around him like he had here.

Cruz was still dancing with excitement. "Justo, get some drinks out here. We'll all get smashed again."

Brian sidled up to me. "Let's get out of here before this guy wakes up on us."

"One drink to make it look good, then we'll split. That's why I had the cab wait."

A drinks cart was pushed out on the apron of the pool.

I had a Campari and soda. Brian took a glass of whiskey that I knew he'd leave somewhere untouched.

Then Kristel showed up. She wore the white gown that swept off one shoulder across her breasts. It looked torn and dirty, and her bare feet were dirty, too. She had a split lip, and there were bruise marks on her arms and shoulders. Her right eye was just about swollen shut, and her blond hair was as wild as Medea's.

She stood there at the edge of the darkness beyond the pool. Her eyes went first to this one, then to that, finally fixing on Cruz. She came forward then, almost gliding on her bare feet.

"Lover," she whispered.

Cruz didn't hear her, hadn't even seen her.

"Mi esposo."

Then he did see her and at once there was a small automatic pistol in her hand and it belched flame.

The first shot hit him in the chest. He staggered back, eyes wide with terror. He who had killed so many—was this girl-woman now going to kill him?

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The second shot caught him in the throat. It was horrible to see. Bloody as the movies were, they couldn't match this.

He turned then, voluntarily or involuntarily, so that the third shot caught him high in the back and threw him into the pool.

Kristel smiled then. It was a small smile and just for herself—satisfaction with what she'd done. The way she'd arranged it and carried it out. Her star turn in a vehicle that was supposed to belong to somebody else.

Cruz hung there in the crystal-blue water. He was lit from beneath by the pool lights. Blood trailed out behind him like purple smoke. The best lighting man in Hollywood couldn't have set it up better.

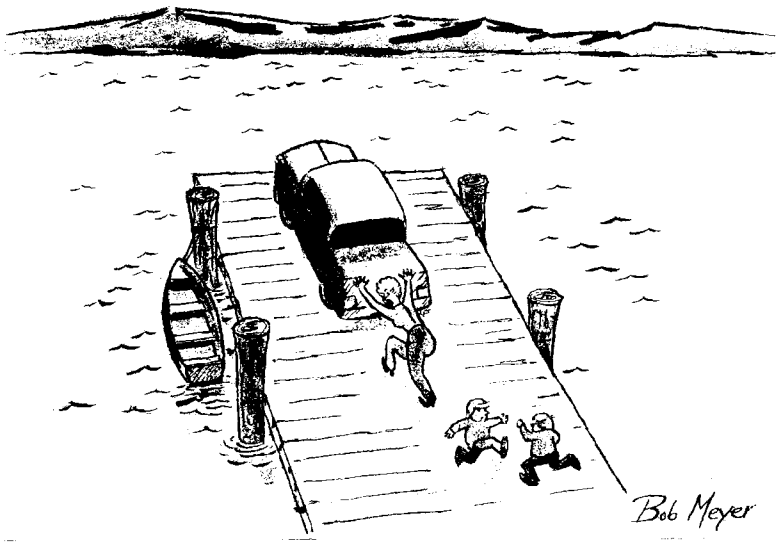
Brian gripped my arm. "Here's the finish we've been looking for, Mike."

The beautifully lit corpse in the water. The long-legged California blonde on the apron with a pistol in her hand—Lana Turner, Lizabeth Scott, Kim Basinger.

"We'll need some lines," I said tightly. "Somebody has to say something."

"Wait—Fat Boy'll give them to us."

We gazed across the apron at Justo. He was down on one knee with a shocked look on his face and no idea what to do next. And he stayed there, speechless, for more time than we could ever allow the scene to play. ●



"Will you kids keep quiet, you'll wake up your father!"

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Caves of Ice

by Eric Wright

When I was about fifteen, I became aware that my grandfather was a liar. Dealing with such knowledge was as much a part of the process of growing up as was learning some years before that my parents were sexual beings. One of the signs that I had entered successfully into a new stage was that my mother could refer to Grandad's way with the truth in front of me, though she still waited until my young sister was out of hearing. She called his anecdotes "Grandad's stories," avoiding the harshness of "lies," but it had the same effect of making me aware that I had grown past him.

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So I knew early not to believe in the truth of his anecdotes, but a wise schoolmate helped me not to dismiss the old man entirely, therefore. "They're still terrific stories," he pointed out, and I grew up a little more as I turned the old man from a source of knowledge into a liar, and then (with my buddy's help) almost immediately into a storyteller, another source of knowledge. I discounted the facts but continued to enjoy the fictions long after he and I silently understood that it was pleasure, not truth, that held me now. Once he realised that I was on to him, I think he began to be less concerned about veracity himself, occupying himself more with the aesthetics of his stories, with finding the satisfying shapes.

At about the same time, he acknowledged my maturity by investing the male characters in his stories with their manliness. He was always the chief hero in the stories, of course, and now, without sinking into lubricious detail, he invited me to under-

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stand that his heroes lived a full life. "When I woke up I was alone," he would say, and wink. "That certainly wasn't how I remembered going to bed." He might have been bragging, but that would not have been consistent with the other aspects of his stories, for he often told tales that reflected comically or pathetically on him—it was not his aim to impress me with his former self but to capture me through the quality of the tale. He simply decided that now I was moving into a man's world, he would expand the stories by giving his characters another dimension. At the same time, his characters began to swear, more or less as I was beginning to do with my buddies.

By the time I was seventeen he was telling me stories about the war. He was a counter-intelligence officer during the war, and in spite of the fact that I was now treating his stories as works of art, admiring their craftsmanship, the phrase "intelligence officer" seemed enough of a guarantee that the experiences he was embroidering really did take place in some form, even if he was not at the cutting edge of the action, one of those parachuted into Serbia to find out which side the partisans were on, say.

He made no secret of the fact that he had had a good war, and he never tried to construct tales of derring-do, concentrating on the marvellous as it occurred in his day-to-day activities. "Did I ever tell you," he would begin, "how I smoked out the Italian prisoner of war who cooked our spaghetti when we were dug in outside Lucca, uncovered the fact that he was the Duke of Albinoni, decked out as a private soldier, a man the partisans were looking for to string up alongside Mussolini? I got him attached to my unit to keep him out of their reach." I guessed that many of these stories were too good to be invented. They simply hadn't happened to him, but to one of his companions-in-arms, and he had absorbed them into his own history. The same was true of his accounts of his amorous adventures.

After the war, he stayed in the army (he had never had it so good before the war), still in "Intelligence" and now spending most of his time on courses to keep his training up to date. And then, in 1952, he was sent up to the Nearctic, to a station on the Hudson's Bay where the Canadian and American governments were building the Distant Early Warning line, the defence shield to protect North America from attack from the north if the Cold War heated up. His job was to create a security presence, as he called it. Out of this experience came one of his best stories. Here it is, in an approximation of his own words:

In July of 1952 I was posted to the Nearctic, a combined-forces base on about parallel 59. I wasn't best pleased, I can tell you, because at the time I was attached to the embassy in Washington,

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D.C., liaising with the C.I.A. Now Washington is a very nice town to liaise in, what with pay and the special allowances. I had to pick up the check occasionally when I met with my opposite number in the C.I.A., who always insisted on the most discreet and expensive restaurants to meet in, and I persuaded my superiors in Ottawa to accept that he made the rules on his turf. Sometimes we made a foursome with a couple of carefully vetted dollies, one of his, and a Canadian version of Miss Moneypenny. Actually, when I didn't have to worry quite so much about security, I was squiring around a plump little chicken who worked for the ambassador's staff on the social side. She reminded me of someone in the movies, Vera-Ellen, only about fifteen pounds heavier, and I've never minded that. From the look on your face I suppose Vera-Ellen was before your time, but the point is, I liked Washington, and the idea of being shipped back to my own northland didn't appeal a bit.

At that time, the station at Nelson was only half built, or rather, it had been completed once, in the forties, and found to be inadequate, and now so many new buildings were being added that virtually an entirely new complex was going up, using the old buildings for storage and as dormitories for the construction workers involved in the new work. A camp of tar-paper shacks heated by oil stoves was being replaced by a modern complex of connected buildings—mess halls, sleeping quarters, offices, all heated by radiators supplied from a central-heating plant.

There were about five hundred servicemen on the base, American and Canadian, mostly infantrymen and support staff, though a large minority were American airmen. The permanent civilians fell into two groups: the service group—the barber, the cinema manager, the woman who ran the coffee shop, and the woman who operated the Eaton's catalogue office, for example—and the people, mainly scientists and technicians, who worked for the Defence Research Board, doing classified work to do with extreme cold. (In one way or another, everyone on the base was involved in trying to figure out how the cold affected the army's ability to function, because if the Russians did come "over the top," they would likely be troops with much more experience of the climate than we had, and thus they would choose the season which would give them the greatest advantage.) Apart from these, there were the temporary civilians, the construction workers.

Outside the camp, about seven miles away, was the town of Nelson, no more than a village, a handful of buildings grouped around the original Hudson's Bay trading post, which had itself expanded to serve the camp personnel looking for something to buy on their day off. A diner had opened in town, catering mainly to people who wanted a change from the meals in dining halls. A taxi appeared,

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sledded in across the ice, to carry people back and forth the seven miles between town and camp, and, inevitably, a couple of ladies appeared and took rooms in the hotel, selling magazine subscriptions. I understand they were deluged with customers until the mountie put them on the plane back to Winnipeg. I didn't buy any magazines myself—I had already fixed myself up with plenty to read by the time these ladies appeared, but I couldn't see what harm they were doing. But it was Canada, and therefore illegal, of course.

My first job was to assess the security needs of the base. The Americans had their own security officer, and he and I met and agreed that there was not a lot for us to do. We were not made aware of any specific secret activity that required a security focus. Obviously the army was testing its equipment to see how it performed under these conditions, how long it took to start an engine at thirty degrees below freezing, for example, and how big a battery was required (I'm not mechanical myself so I am just giving made-up examples) and their conclusions were recorded and filed. I inspected our filing cabinets to make sure they were hard to break into, and Hector, my American colleague, did the same. The only genuinely sensitive area was the Defence Research Board laboratory, a small warehouse-like building surrounded by a high steel-mesh fence, guarded from the inside by their own security personnel who issued their own passes to anyone granted access. They told me the laboratory was outside my jurisdiction, and I was not eligible for a pass. I queried this with Ottawa and was told to accept it. I then put it in writing that I did not wish to be held responsible for any breakdown in the D.R.B. security. Rule Number One, my boy: Cover your rear end.

This was the general picture, then, and you might ask why I was sent up there at all, or why someone in Intelligence wasn't already in place; in other words, why send me up *at that point?* The reason was that somewhere on the base, or nearby, a hostile agent had recently opened for business, someone collecting and sending information, probably to a spy ship in the North Atlantic, for onward transmission to Moscow. Ottawa had intercepted his transmissions and I was shown a sample when I was in Ottawa getting briefed. The material I saw was so ordinary that I wondered at first why he had bothered to send it, consisting as it did of a stream of more or less disconnected comments and notes about the agent's daily encounters. "I talked to a couple of American officers just arrived today. They'd been transferred from a base near Butte, Montana. . . . Three Dakotas landed today, up from Washingon, one of the pilots said. . . . More Van Doos arrived—they were in the beer parlour celebrating their reunion; apparently they'd been split up lately into small groups and posted all

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over the country, but now they are being brought together. . . ." (The Van Doos are the Royal 22nd regiment, of course. Frenchmen. From Quebec.) My superior in Ottawa put together several transmissions as a sample and told me to study it, see if it told me anything.

I could make nothing of it. So trivial was the information that I could only assume that it was in code, and I'm not qualified to deal with that.

"We wondered if it was a new version of the wheelbarrow story," my superior said. "We tried hard at first to penetrate through to the underlying text, break the code, but there isn't one. The real information is in all this inconsequential stuff. If you put it together you get a picture of what is going on in Nelson. These three officers transferred from Butte, for example. They had been in Butte working with a civilian factory on manufacturing survival clothing. They'd come to Nelson to field-test it. The Van Doos had been brought together for a field exercise to test the support required for arctic warfare. See, they have far too many N.C.O. quartermaster types with them. And so on. In other words, everyone he is reporting on is doing exactly what everyone knows they are doing, trying to prepare to fight a war in the arctic. What he's telling them is that nothing else is going on."

"The wheelbarrow story?" I asked.

"The story of the construction worker who wheeled a barrowload of rubbish—bits of pipe, broken taps, and so on—past the security gate of the construction site every night. The contractors had the guards sift through this rubbish, and sometimes they took anything semivaluable away from him—copper scrap, for instance—but they knew he was stealing something else they couldn't find. Every night the guy walked away with a barrow full of bits and pieces, until one day he told them he was quitting, and the guards asked him, as a favour, to tell them what he was stealing. The answer, of course, was wheelbarrows. So this stream of low-grade information that our man is sending is not covering up anything else—it is the thing they want to know."

"You mean that by putting together all this data they get a picture of what's happening?"

"Well, no. What they could get from the data was a picture of what *wasn't* happening. By thoroughly analysing all their agents' information, they could be sure that nothing was going on. They didn't uncover anything striking, but that was valuable knowledge, do you see? It enabled them to make their own plans without having to worry about us."

"No news is good news?" I said.

"That's it."

"Then why send me up there, now that you know?"

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"We want the agent, of course. We don't like the idea of someone up there with a transmitter keeping Uncle Joe in touch. Especially if nothing much is happening. Much better that he should be in the dark. So we're sending you in to find him. You won't find him if he's any good, of course, but just sending you up there will send a message that we're on to him."

"You don't think I have a chance?"

"You might stumble across him, I suppose."

I said, "How covert should my operation be?"

"The point of it is that it be known what you are. We want him to know that security is being tightened."

"Why?"

"Sometimes, if you get close to the burrow, the rabbit bolts. Make sure you keep tabs on anyone leaving the camp."

"How many ways out are there?"

"Air: civilian plane twice a week. Land: all winter when it's frozen and you have some dogs, or a tractor. Sea: during the six-week summer if you can find a boat."

Even then I think I smelled a rat, but hindsight can be tricky. You don't like to feel you've been taken for an absolute horse's arse, a certain amount of pride is involved, so I made the decision then to try to find this beggar if I could. I assumed that this would be totally consistent with what they wanted from me: They just didn't think I could do it. (I should say at this point that I was not instrumental in catching the beggar: This is not that kind of story.)

As far as our own boys were concerned, Hector, the American, and I agreed that there was little room in our ranks for a spy. In the first place, the base had quite a high classification, so all the troops of both jurisdictions had been screened before being posted up there. And because the only real way in for the military was by air, by military transport, no one could have brought in a transmitter—they were big in those days—without being noticed, and on the chance that someone had found a way, bringing one in piece by piece, say, there was no possibility they could have operated it in a barrack room. So the search was limited to N.C.O.'s and officers, all those with separate rooms. The first chance we could, we accompanied the duty officer on his routine inspection, and found nothing. We also did a tour of the married quarters with him and came up with nothing there, either. So we were down to the civilians, as we had expected.

The civvies were a purely Canadian problem. First I went to town to liaise with the RCMP, who are responsible for national security, and the constable showed me what he had done. He had a nominal roll of all the construction workers by trade and company. Within days of each man's arrival at Nelson, Constable

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Duthie interviewed them and card-indexed them. Before I arrived he was not looking for security risks, primarily, but for those with criminal records. Nelson was a frontier town and all kinds of people came there to pause on the way downhill. Twice Duthie had arrested men who were wanted in the city for major crimes (he had been warned they might be arriving). He never worried about nonpayment of alimony and such-like offences, reckoning them to be no danger to the state or other individuals. He was most keen to find the ones previously convicted of violent assault before they infected the camp. In my time I think he sent six men south without arresting them—the security angle gave him the power—and he missed one who within a week of arriving got into a knife fight and laid open the face of a steam fitter from his chin to his eyebrow. The man had a long list of similar assaults and Constable Duthie blamed himself for not catching him when he arrived.

No one could get on the base without a security pass, and if he was a civilian the pass had to be countersigned by Duthie, which meant that Duthie had a complete list, with, in each case, a copy of the small interview he had undertaken—not an interrogation, really, just a primary impression.

I went through Duthie's list methodically, interviewing again every civilian against whom there was the slightest question, which meant every civilian not born in Canada. Then I boiled that list down to those who had arrived since the end of the war, because I agreed with Duthie that this surely must be the group most likely to contain one of Uncle Joe's boys.

No one I interviewed offered any reason why I should take any special note of them.

But I had made my presence felt, and after a month I could think of nothing else to do. Equipment existed which would enable me to trace the signals being transmitted by the enemy, but when I asked Ottawa about supplying it they said it wasn't a matter of sending up a piece of equipment but of a whole team necessary to operate it over a twenty-four-hour shift, and the appearance of such a team would certainly be noticed by the agent, causing him to shut down until the team was withdrawn.

Of course, the construction workers came and went and I interviewed the new arrivals, but none of them made my antennae quiver. It would have been pretty boring if I had not met Isabel, a schoolteacher: There was a small school on the base run by the Canadian military but staffed by civilians. My first marriage having failed while I was in Italy, I was very much open to suggestions in the romance department, and Isabel and I soon became an item, as they say nowadays.

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(Here my grandfather's voice dropped and he winked, and I tried to look knowing.)

During the mornings I was generally able to keep busy. I was put on the list of those whose signature was required when the military was posted on or off the base, along with the pay office and the quartermaster's stores, and the army always generates a certain amount of routine paperwork, weekly reports, and so on. But the afternoons dragged until I worked out a routine of calling on people who would welcome a chat—Hector, for instance, and the boys in the fire hall. A couple of times a week I got a truck from the transport pool to visit Constable Duthie in town. I had coffee with someone or other most afternoons. Often I called in on the barber, a very nice Polish chap who fought with Paderewski and had been taken prisoner by the Russians but got away to the West and wound up in a Displaced Persons camp. From there he immigrated to Canada and made his way to Nelson. I didn't get my hair cut every two days, of course, though he did trim it once a week, but the thing was the barbershop was the equivalent of the village general store, full of interesting and occasionally scandalous gossip about the neighbours and their doings. Figaro himself (as we nicknamed him) had a great curiosity about everyone and everything around the camp and speculated endlessly with me about the meaning of the comings and goings of his customers.

And then, sometime before Christmas, the navy arrived.

It seemed a curious unit from the start. Two petty officers and two leading seamen comprised the entire roster of enlisted men. As well, they brought six civilians who were skilled tradesmen—two carpenters, a plumber/steamfitter, an electrician, and two others who I supected were armourers. Then, over the ice by tractor-trailer came the materials to construct a kind of blank, windowless shed with big doors on each end which they put together on the beach, extending it slightly over the ice like a boathouse. Finally, over the ice came a crate about twenty feet long and six feet square, completely sealed. This crate they slid into the waiting shed, closing the doors tight. The next day a pile of lumber from the dismantled packing case—for that's what it was—was burned on the beach. Finally a steel-mesh fence was erected around the whole structure complete with a tiny guardhouse, which the four sailors then proceeded to man in shifts, one at a time, sending their civilians home.

I thought at the time that their efforts at deception were a bit rudimentary. Given the location of the "boathouse" and the size and shape of the mysterious crate, it seemed obvious that what they were doing must have something to do with operating a vessel under the ice, and because midget or two-man submarines had already proved themselves during the war, that seemed the most

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likely possibility, finding out how a midget submarine behaves under the ice. We couldn't confirm this because the sailors formed a compact group in the mess, the three who weren't on guard duty always eating together, occasionally playing billiards, but never responding to casual queries about their mission. Actually, that's not quite true. They made no secret of the fact that their work was secret, "classified," which ended enquiries but not speculation and gossip, and, to add to the mystery, from time to time an officer would appear, someone below field rank, usually a very young lieutenant. This officer would spend a day or two in the boathouse and then fly back to Ottawa. While he was there, special permission was granted by the regimental sergeant-major, the senior NCO, for him to take his meals with his own NCO's, in the sergeants' mess. Did you know that no officer can enter the sergeants' mess without the permission of the senior N.C.O. present?

As I thought, and said to Hector, they were managing things rather clumsily. It seemed to me that it would have been cleverer to create a false mission, to say they were conducting a study, for example, on the pressure exerted on a ship's hull by ice of different thicknesses. Everyone else seemed to be studying ice, and surely the navy had its own questions. Instead they seemed to be going out of their way to suggest that what they were up to was much more arcane than studying ice.

About now I was called to Ottawa again to discuss the whole security situation, specifically, it turned out, the vulnerability of the navy's operation to penetration. I was let in on the fact that what the navy was doing was very delicate and extremely important, but not told exactly what, and I came away absolutely certain now that it involved operating two-men submarines under the ice. Later, I could not recall a concrete remark that I could attribute my understanding to, but an understanding I certainly had. The point of my meeting my O\C, though, was to instruct me to mount a more intense search for the agent.

When I returned to base, I undertook to call a meeting of myself, Hector, and Constable Duthie to create a united thrust to root out this beggar. At the same time, the navy doubled its own guard. A second perimeter fence was erected around the navy compound, with a second gatehouse the army was asked to man. Now regularly, new naval officers, occasionally one of field rank, flew in for the day, visited the boathouse, whispered with the navy NCO's for an hour or two in the corner of the mess, then departed without fuss. And now a sign appeared on the outer fence, "Extreme Danger, Stay Away."

And then, early in October, we had a bonfire. Did I tell you we used to celebrate every holiday of both countries—Queen

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Victoria's birthday, July Fourth, both Thanksgivings—the lot? On this night there was to be a bonfire and fireworks put on by the Americans, mainly for the kids, but afterwards there was to be a dance in the sergeants' mess to which officers were invited. It looked like being the party of the year.

The day before the party I was called to a meeting in the navy building. I had never visited the boathouse before, and when I arrived, more curious about what was inside the shed than I was about the topic of the meeting, which was pretty sure to be some kind of review of security precautions, I found Hector and Constable Duthie present. The room was tiny, only half the interior of the shed, which had been divided into two equal compartments. The door to the other compartment was shut tight. Two navy men were present, and the five of us made a pretty full room.

"Thank you for coming. I won't keep you long," the senior petty officer said. "Let me get to the point of the meeting: We have information that someone will try to breach our security tomorrow night."

"Break in? During the fireworks?"

"Precisely. They see it as an ideal opportunity."

"Who passed on this information?" I asked.

"Ottawa," he said. "Now, we have no idea if the information is good or bad. We—I mean Ottawa—don't think it's necessary to inform anyone not involved with security. We don't want it known that we are on to him, we might be wrong, and besides we just want to . . . defuse him. So, with your agreement, we'll meet here tomorrow night. We'll arrive separately at fifteen-minute intervals after sunset. Wear your parkas as you arrive, just in case; they make a pretty good disguise. And be prepared for a dull couple of hours until he shows up, because we can't have any light showing."

"How will we know he's coming?" I asked. I was referring to the lack of windows.

The sailor pointed to a hole, a knot-hole, in the wall behind him. "There's one on each wall," he said. "We can see out, but he can't see in. That's why we can't show a light. If he gets alarmed, he will scuttle off before we've laid hands on him. We want him actually inside the door before we jump. If there are more than one, both should be inside before we move."

"Three?" I asked.

"We are taking precautions against two, sir; we think three very unlikely."

"And our job?"

"Grab him, of course. There will be five of us, two of my people and you three. Enough even to grab two men."

"Will you be armed?"

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"In a space this confined, it would be dangerous to wave guns about. We have to smother him."

"Any idea who he is?"

"Not the slightest."

The next night we assembled one by one and took our places round the tiny room. The chief petty officer watched through his peephole, and when the first firework exploded he switched off the lights, we manned the other peepholes, and waited. It was a curious feeling, as if we were in a séance, awaiting a spirit manifestation ("a spook," joked Hector, when I mentioned it. You know that in the trade that's what we call spies? Hector was sort of punning, you see.).

It seemed safe to chat quietly, and we swapped stories of our pasts. The junior petty officer had, typically, grown up in Regina, two thousand miles from the sea; Constable Duthie came from a long line of mounties in Prince Albert; Hector was in the middle of his story, about growing up in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, when the quarry appeared, or rather the chief sailor saw him, silently cutting a hole in the outer perimeter fence. A few minutes later he had breached the second fence. "It isn't designed to be a major barrier," the sailor said. "It's symbolic. More to attract than repel. I didn't think we'd made it that easy, though. I'm surprised he hasn't caught on. Here he comes now. He's all alone."

"Can you tell who he is, or where he's from?" Hector whispered.

"His parka isn't military issue. He's a civilian."

"A construction worker?"

"He's below the sight line of this hole. Now."

There was the sound of metal scraping metal as he tried the lock, then a heavier, meatier scrunching as he inserted a bar into the jamb and forced open the door.

We held our breath until he switched on his flashlight, and the sailor flicked on our switch and we saw who it was.

"Drop the light, Figaro," the sailor said.

The barber put down his flashlight. "Why aren't you all at the party?" he asked.

"We were waiting for you. I think he's yours, Constable."

Duthie nodded, then turned to me. "Put him in your lock-up for the night, would you? I'll go over to the barber shop, see what I can find." He held out his hand to the barber. "Give me the keys."

"The transmitter is in the seat of the customer chair," the barber said. "You can slide it out. No need to break anything. You might as well leave the shop intact for the next barber."

It all seemed anticlimactic—no shoot-out, no chase, and although the barber was a surprise, I had expected more. Then I remembered. "There's something I'd like to know," I said. "What

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was the barber after? What *is* in the back of this shed? Are you going to tell us?"

The sailors looked at each other. The senior petty officer said, "That seems fair. Lieutenant, you are bound by the Official Secrets Act while you are in Canada, not so?"

Hector said, "Not by yours, but I'm bound by our version of it to reveal nothing except to my superior officer in Washington."

"I think you will find your superior is already in the picture. Okay. Put Figaro away and come back. I'll show you."

We locked the barber up in the guardhouse and returned to the navy compound. The sailor opened the door to the back compartment. It was bitterly cold. At the end, where the shed extended out over the now frozen water, there was a chamber about six feet square carved out of the ice. The walls of the chamber went down to the seabed. Inside the chamber a double row of posts rested on the seabed about twelve inches apart, topped with two twelve-inch planks and decked over with one-by-fours.

"What the hell is it?" Hector asked.

"In the spring, when the ice melts, it will be a dock."

"But it's only three feet wide."

"This is a model to test the technique. The real dock will be as wide as we decide. Probably fifty feet square."

"How did you do it?"

"To put it simply, a few weeks ago, when the ice was a foot thick, we cut and shaved off eleven-and-a-half inches. Then, as the thin part collected a foot of ice under it, we cut down again, and so on; it didn't take long before we were building inside a solid wall of ice."

It took us some time to think it through. I said, "And that's what this is all about? *This* is what you've been guarding? *This?* We all thought you were testing little submarines, or some such. Something secret and complicated. All the time you were building a damn ice palace."

"Give it its proper name: 'Investigating Techniques of Undersurface Construction in Subfreezing Temperatures.'"

"But there's nothing to it. What's so secret?"

"It's a simple idea, granted, but so is the wheel, and the plough, or the fore-and-aft sail. All simple ideas. But this one we'd like to keep to ourselves for as long as we can. Now I have to remind you again of the Official Secrets Act; you can't talk about this to anyone outside this building."

Then, two weeks later, they were gone, first dismantling the boathouse and flooding the ice palace by chiseling a hole in one wall. There was a snowstorm the day they left, and in two days you could see no trace of the operation. The dock was invisible through the ice, and in the spring it had floated away before anyone noticed it. That was something they apparently hadn't consid-

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ered, that the posts would have to be anchored to the seabed, and *that* told me that they had probably abandoned the project, and I'm ashamed to say it was some time before the truth dawned on me.

I said, "What was that?"

"It wasn't an ice palace, or any kind of study of under-ice construction techniques. The whole thing was just a bloody mousetrap, and the ice palace was the cheese, designed to trap Figaro. I mean the *idea* that there was something going on was the real trap. They didn't need to build anything, in fact; they just built that ice palace to amuse themselves while they waited for Figaro. That must be true, but I was never able to confirm it because I was posted back to Washington shortly afterwards." There he ended.

It's a good story, I think, and Grandad told it well, as he always did. But I have been wary of telling it myself. First I want to find someone who has lived and worked in the north, an engineer from Toktoyuktuk, say, and ask him if the thing is possible, building an ice chamber like that, shaving the ice and all that. Then I'll know whether it was the sailors' creation or Grandad's, which one invented it to pass the time on a winter's night. ●

Victim

by Jessica Patraw

Unable to speak,
Yet I hold all the clues.
The light is so bright
As I lie here and stare,
Unable to blink
Or I'd cause quite a scare.
So many hands upon me,
So many instruments used.
All guessing what happened,
Yet somehow amused.
Please complete your
Examination so I can
Finally rest.
Take plenty of samples
For that DNA test.
Make the case a strong one
Since I can no longer speak.
Gather enough evidence
So he doesn't go free.
The victim is me, you see,
The victim is me.

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Art by June Levine

TIFFANY BLUE

by Melodie Johnson Howe

"How can James do this to me, Diana?" Julie Plume asked as we walked past Tiffany's. It was five o'clock on a cold wintry day, and Fifth Avenue was beginning to fill with office workers hurrying for home or the nearest bar.

"The movie's wrapped and he's gone back to his wife," I explained.

Was it her youth or the insularity of her beauty that kept Julie from grasping the more simple facts of life? Or was I just too old and too jaded? I gave her a sideways glance. She was wearing a black hat pulled low over her natural blond hair. My hair was determinedly blond. A red muffler nestled her firm, defiant chin. My chin was softening. Her turned-up nose and high cheekbones were flush from the cold, making her look even younger and shockingly wholesome. I don't think I ever looked wholesome, even when I was. Her black coat was pulled tightly around her lithe, supple figure. My feet were killing me. Yes, I was too old and too jaded.

"I hate it when filming ends, Diana. I feel like I've been abandoned, like I've been left by my parents or something. I should have realized when we were in bed and I whispered in his ear,

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'Jimmy, Jimmy,' and he told me to call him James that our affair wasn't going anywhere."

I laughed. "Maybe the name Jimmy makes him feel like a little boy."

"He told me that only his wife calls him Jimmy."

I remembered the feel of his wife's quivering hand in mine when I had first met her. It was a more vivid memory than the feel of James's body on my body, or his lips on my lips. In fact, I couldn't remember his intimate touch at all. Only his wife's small nervous hand. It was like grasping a sparrow. How many years ago was that? Twenty? Or more?

Novelist and short story writer Melodie Johnson Howe had an earlier career as a movie actress, and she draws on that experience in much of her work, especially in this new short story. Ms. Howe's characterizations are unfailingly convincing, which may explain why her first book received not one but three major award nominations. The author lives in her native California. ¶

"Why did you go to bed with him in the first place?" I asked, pulling up the collar of my camel-colored coat. "You know his reputation. He always goes back to Carol."

I marveled at how I could ask her this without feeling hypocritical. Time, and a husband whom I'd loved deeply until his death, had intervened. My brief affair with James Barron no longer mattered in my life. Except that I had just finished acting in his new movie. But that's, as they say, *show biz.*

"He's a brilliant director. The most important one I've worked with, that's why I went to bed with him."

"You've only worked with one other director, Julie."

"James brought something out in me I didn't know I had. You saw it in the dailies. Everybody saw it. They're talking *Oscar,* Diana." Her green eyes flashed with triumph.

Unbelievably, they *were* talking Oscar performance. Julie and I had just come from viewing the dailies. Sitting in the darkness of the screening room I had marveled at how the camera loved her beauty, but also how it had magnified her extraordinary lack of depth and emotion. James had corrected for her lack of talent by allowing her to say only five or six words in a scene; then he'd quickly cut to me, or one of the other lesser-known actors. By not letting his camera linger on Julie, he had created mystery where there was none. And isn't that what good filmmaking is all about? Yet, sitting there in the dark, I knew the movie wasn't any good. I knew that James Barron had lost his touch.

"I thought James and I had developed something," Julie continued. "You know, like Woody Allen and Diane Keaton. Or even Mia Farrow. It's not like I expected our relationship to last forever, but

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just long enough for him to star me in two or three of his films. I know he's not as hot as he used to be, but I thought he could put me over the top. You know what he's going to do next?"

"What?"

"Some script about two men and an elephant. The only woman in it is a middle-aged zoologist. Can you believe it?" she asked, appalled.

Middle-aged? I made a mental note of this, since parts for women my age did not come along that often. "What's the title of the script?" I asked nonchalantly.

Ignoring my question, she stopped and stared bleakly into a dirty gray snowbank. People swerved around us unaware that it was the soon to be famous Julie Plume and the vaguely familiar but not in the least bit famous Diana Poole who were blocking their way.

"I can't believe James is dumping me." Her eyes shone with a disquieting intensity.

"Did you honestly think you would be different? So this new script is about two men and a zoologist?" I tried not to sound too desperate.

"Elephant. Why does he always go back to his wife? I mean, don't you find that weird?"

"Maybe he loves Carol. Do you know the title of the script or not?" The direct approach was always better with Julie.

"Are you being serious?" she demanded.

"About what?"

"About James loving Carol. I can't believe how naive you are, and at *your* age."

I smiled. "My age allows me to be serious about many things, even love. And it is a serious business, Julie. I'd be careful if I were you. Can we walk? I'm getting cold. I want to get back to the hotel."

But she stayed rooted to the middle of the sidewalk. "What if I can't act without him?" she asked.

"Don't be silly. You're on your way to being a huge star. Don't dissipate your energies. It can all be lost so easily. And be gracious to Carol tonight." I was very gracious to her twenty-some years ago, I thought guiltily.

"He invited *his wife* to his wrap party?" Her eyes widened incredulously.

"He always does. She flew in from L.A. this morning."

"Well, that's a slap in the face, isn't it?"

"Whose face are we talking about?"

"Look!" she said in a low, intense voice.

I followed her gaze. Nestled in the dirty gray snowbank, and briefly caught in the lights of a cab pulling away from the curb, was a little blue box tied with a white ribbon. Julie picked it up.

"It's from Tiffany's." She spoke in quiet awe, as if she had just entered St. Patrick's Cathedral.

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"Someone getting into that cab must've dropped it." I stared down Fifth Avenue at a mass of red taillights. Exhaust curled up from the cars and undulated on their yellow trunks like beckoning apparitions.

"It's small. That means jewelry." Julie's breath made a ghostly curl upward toward the blackening sky. She held the box to her ear as if she had discovered a seashell in the snow, then shook it. "It's jewelry," she confirmed.

"Give it to the store's doorman. He'll take care of it." I looked back at Tiffany's; its windows glowed like giant candelabras flickering seductively in a rich, dark room.

"The doorman? Are you kidding? He'll just give it to his wife, or girlfriend, or try to sell it." She slipped the little blue box into her coat pocket and walked quickly away. She was putting as much distance between herself and Tiffany's as fast as she could.

"What are you doing?" I asked, trying to keep up with her.

"I want to see what's in it." Maintaining her fast pace, she took off her glove and slipped her bare hand inside her coat pocket. After a few moments she announced, "I have the ribbon off. And now the lid. I feel something cold and wonderful."

She removed her hand from her pocket. Resting in her palm was a diamond and emerald earring in the shape of a large shimmering teardrop. She quickly thrust her hand back into her pocket. "Is that not the most beautiful thing you've ever seen, Diana? And to think, they come in pairs like socks."

Her march was stopped by a red light. Cars filled the intersection. Pedestrians milled. Catching my breath I managed to say, "We can give the earrings to a salesperson if you don't trust the doorman."

"How do we know a salesperson won't keep the earrings?" She was whispering now, aware of the people waiting impatiently around us. "There's no sales slip or anything."

"Well, you can't keep them. Someone will be back looking for them."

"Lower your voice. Let me think about this."

"What do you have to think about?" I whispered. "Someone bought those for a gift. Maybe he wanted to give them to her tonight."

"Gift? He? Her? My, my, aren't you the romantic," she observed sarcastically.

When did romance and love become so disdainful to the young? I wondered. I must've been in love with my husband and not noticed the change.

"Is that why you went to bed with James?" she asked in a low, insinuating voice.

I was taken aback. How did she know? Did he tell her?

"Look, I was younger than you and it was my first acting role, and his first chance at directing. We were both scared. We helped each

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other through it." Ah, revision. Or the truth? I wasn't sure anymore.

"Oh, I see, you were doing a good deed. Was he married to Carol then?"

But Carol's hand did tremble in mine. "What does any of this have to do with you stealing earrings?"

"There's stealing and there's stealing. That's all," she said blithely.

"I'm not going to stand on this freezing-cold corner and discuss moral equivalency with you."

Julie looked thoughtful. "You know, I don't think there is any romance connected to these earrings. I think some old, wealthy woman with saggy earlobes bought these for herself. Someone who has nothing better to do with her time or money. A woman like James's wife."

"The woman could be Ivana Trump for all I care. The earrings do not belong to you."

"Keep your voice down. Oh, I see. Nothing belongs to me. Not James. Not the earrings. I wonder what belongs to Carol? Did you ever ask yourself that, Diana?" She suddenly laughed and put her arm around mine as if we were the best of friends. Her cheeks and nose were red like a kid's.

"I promise I'll return the earrings tomorrow. I just want to wear them tonight to James's party. I've never had anything so beautiful. I feel like Cinderella."

The light changed. As Julie dashed across the street she flashed her heartbreakingly beautiful smile at me as if I were her fairy godmother and she was thanking me for a magical act I had just accomplished. But I was no fairy godmother. I was an actress who understood the rules of the game. And Julie? Well, I don't know what she understood.

James Barron's party was being held in a private dining room in the hotel where "the talent," as the production people liked to refer to us, were staying. The party was in full swing when I arrived. French-mirrored walls reflected crystal chandeliers. Candlelight glowed on black silk-covered tables. The actors, the upper echelon of the crew, and the various producers and moneymen formed little groups where they talked, lied, and laughed. Julie stood in the middle of the room wearing a lime-green slip of a gown and pretending to hang on every word of her leading man, the moody Lucas Caine. The diamond and emerald teardrops, dangling from her delicate lobes, erupted in small bursts of light like a Lilliputian Fourth of July.

"Diana, you look wonderful." Howard Marsh threw his arms around me and swayed me back and forth in one of his great bear hugs. Then with a quaint swashbuckling elegance he swept two glasses of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter, handed me one, and bowed. Then he looked forlornly around the room.

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"We're out of work again, darling." He heaved a theatrical sigh.

"Waiting for the phone to ring again, darling." I imitated his sigh and smoothed my burgundy velvet suit jacket.

"There's something regressive about waiting for the phone to ring. It's not as if we're actors at all, but just a group of desperate old pimply-faced teenagers still waiting to be asked out. Cheers."

After we clinked our glasses and drank I casually asked, "Did you hear about James's next project?"

"Something about two men and a rhino."

"A zoologist. What's it called?"

"I have no idea. I know there's nothing in it for me. All the male parts will be for twenty-year-olds. I wonder how old the rhino is? Did you see those earrings Julie is wearing?"

I nodded as Julie tossed her head back and laughed at something Lucas said. Since he had no sense of humor and she couldn't act, her laughter sounded loud and forced, as if she had been practicing it alone in front of her mirror. I knew this display of mirth was for James's benefit. Seemingly oblivious of her, he lurked in a dim corner. In his late forties, and wearing small dark glasses and a black suit, James Barron looked as if he were attending a funeral instead of hosting his own party. He was also dyeing his hair, a sign that he was afraid of losing that all-important audience: the young. The pressures of Hollywood have so little to do with talent. Next to him was Marcus, his cinematographer, a tall, distant man who was listing from too many martinis.

"I know Julie has no conscience," Howard sniffed. "But I can't believe she has the guts to wear those earrings."

"I see she told you what happened. Of course she has the guts."

"She shouldn't be blabbing it around."

"She promised she'd return . . ."

"Ixnay. The Tantrum is approaching with The Wife," he warned under his breath. The Tantrum was Howard's name for one of our eight producers, a man who had all the emotional restraint of an infant.

"My two favorite actors," he greeted us. Any actor he was talking to was his favorite, but Howard and I immediately forgot this and beamed gratefully under his compliment.

The Tantrum tilted his fetus-shaped head toward his companion and said, "You both know Carol Barron, James's wife?"

"Of course we know Carol," we gushed in unison, and too eagerly. Then I felt her hand in mine. Her fingers no longer trembled. It was just another lifeless handshake.

"I haven't seen you in ages, Diana." She was proudly thin, as if that was where she had placed all her energies. Her dark hair was cut into a short severe style; it looked like a protective helmet. "I hear you're very good in the film."

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"The real surprise of the movie is Julie Plume," The Tantrum announced with his usual insensitivity.

Carol forced a thin-lipped smile. "Yes, I hear she's great. James knows how to get the best out of his actresses."

Her tired brown eyes met my tired blue ones and I knew she knew. But was it about Julie? Or me? Or all the other actresses who'd had a quick affair with her husband and then left discreetly so he could return to her?

"Are those earrings real?" The Tantrum's puffy eyes were riveted on Julie. His moist baby-mouth hung open.

"Of course they're real," Carol answered. "My husband always tries for reality. Excuse me." She eased away from us.

"What did she mean by that?" I asked.

"I thought you knew. James gave Julie those earrings," Howard said, shaking his head in dismay.

"What?"

"He better not have charged the production for them," The Tantrum grumbled. Forgetting that Howard and I existed, he turned his back on us and began to talk to one of his coproducers.

"Howard," I said, "James didn't buy Julie those earrings. She found them in a snowbank."

He blessed me with his fatherly smile. Howard had the paternal look down perfectly. He'd been playing Julie's father in the movie.

"Don't tell me you believe her story, Diana? She actually winked at me when she told it."

Before I could respond, Lucas Caine sidled up to me and slipped his arm around my waist. "I wish I was man enough to go to bed with an older woman. But I know you'd make me feel ineffectual."

"God, what a line you have, Lucas." Howard rolled his eyes.

"That line gets me out of more problems." A lock of Lucas's hair, the color of chocolate cake, flopped onto his forehead. Irritated that there was a part of his body he couldn't control, he huffily pushed the errant strand back into its proper place, then glanced over at Julie. She was now talking to one of the movie's five screenwriters.

"How could James give her those earrings when he only gave me a travel clock from Tiffany's?" he demanded. "I worked my ass off making her look good. And who uses travel clocks anymore?"

"If he spent that much money, maybe he really loves her," Howard observed.

"Love?" Lucas repeated the word as if he had never heard it before.

"Well, it's the only answer I can come up with." Howard blushed, embarrassed at his own sentimentality. Why were people my age suddenly self-conscious about love?

"As far as I know, he's never given any of his other conquests a gift like that," he added defensively.

"James did not give her those earrings," I said. "She found them

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in a snowbank."

"Diana, you're a woman of the world. How can you believe a stupid story like that?" Lucas asked, letting his eyes follow the strand of pearls that curved around my neck and down into my cleavage.

"Because I was with her."

But he wasn't listening. His eyes had darted quickly away from my cleavage, and he was now talking to Howard. "James owes Julie. Big time. He bought her off because she won't play the game, so she won't tell The Wife. But he wasted his money. The wife knows. Everyone knows."

"Everyone always knows," Howard said sagely.

Diana the Undaunted tried again. "I was with Julie. We were walking down Fifth Avenue. She saw a little blue box with a white ribbon tied around it in a snowbank . . ."

"Sure, Diana. She found the earrings all tied up in a Tiffany box." Again Lucas slid his arm around my waist and drew me to him. "Would you really make me feel ineffectual?"

"Yes. Excuse me."

I made my way across the room to Julie. She was standing at the buffet table with an empty plate in her hand, staring down at the lush display of lobster, cracked crab, oysters, clams, and shrimp.

"Can I eat any of this?" she asked me. "I'm on a macramé diet."

"Macrobiotic. Come here, I want to talk with you."

"You're hurting my arm," she said, as I firmly guided her over to a secluded corner filled by a desolate-looking palm. Hotels must grow these plants in their basements, I thought.

"You better not have bruised me, Diana. I'm supposed to have pictures taken for *Vogue* tomorrow," she whined, inspecting her arm.

"Did you tell everyone that James gave you those earrings?" I demanded.

"No. I told them the truth."

"So why do they all think he gave them to you?"

"We live in cynical times. I can't help it if people choose not to believe the truth. Isn't lobster high in cholesterol?" She looked longingly back at the buffet.

"You don't have cholesterol. I don't think you even have a pulse. Howard said you winked at him when you told him about finding the Tiffany box. A wink can undercut the truth, Julie. And you're just the kind of actress who'd try such an obvious gesture."

Anger pulled the corners of her mouth down. "Remember, Diana, they're talking Oscar. And Howard always thinks I'm winking at him."

"You want everyone to believe James gave you those earrings. That's why you wanted to keep them, isn't it? Cinderella, my ass."

"God, I didn't realize how jealous you are of James and me."

"I'm not thinking of you two, I'm thinking of The Wife."

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"Did you think about The Wife when you went to bed with him? I told everybody the truth. My conscience is clear."

"Be careful, Julie. A wife has a tendency to draw the line when she thinks her husband is giving expensive jewelry to his girlfriend."

"What's the worst she can do? Leave him?" she asked with feigned innocence.

"You can't really want him."

"He understands my abilities as an actress." She displayed her perfect smile, then turned on her heels, blond hair fanning out, and returned to the buffet. I took a long swallow of warm champagne.

"I've been trying to remember the first time we met." Carol Barron approached. "It was James's first movie, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"A long time ago."

"A long time ago."

"We met on the set. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"We've both changed a great deal since then."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry about your husband."

"Thank you. I never thought I'd go back to acting, but I have to pay the bills now," I chatted uneasily.

Carol peered at Julie, who, still holding an empty plate, was talking to The Tantrum. "Did James ever give you anything as beautiful as those earrings?" she asked.

"Why should he?" I stammered, and then quickly added, "James didn't give those to her. She found them in a snowbank near Tiffany's."

Deep lines curved around her wry smile. "You must think I'm some poor desperate woman who has no self-respect. And maybe I am. But don't insult my intelligence. It's all I have left."

"I know it sounds implausible, but I was with Julie when she found them. She's just wearing them for tonight. Like Cinderella." *Oh, God.* "She's going to return them tomorrow."

"Cinderella?" She laughed harshly. "Julie's just another bad actress in another of James's bad movies. Do you remember when he made good movies?"

"Yes."

"I loved him then."

I knew she was saying she loved him when I had had an affair with him. We smiled at each other and sipped our champagne.

"How can I convince you that Julie's story is true?" I asked. "If you can't believe her, then at least believe me. I was with her."

"Why should I believe you?" she asked evenly.

"Because . . ." I stopped. She was right. Why should she believe me? And why did I want her to?

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"Are you trying to correct a wrong, Diana?"

"No. Maybe. Look, I do know the truth about the earrings. That's all."

"Only I can correct what is wrong. Let's talk about something else. Do you know you'd be perfect for the role of the zoologist in James's next movie?"

"Really? What's it called?" I marveled at how I could still play the game even while I was trying to ease my own guilt. I was too old and too jaded. And God knows my feet still hurt.

"I don't know the title. Something about two men and a giraffe. I'm tired. Will you tell James I've gone up to our room?" Carol extended her hand. I took it. It was a cold, dead thing. I wanted it to tremble. I wanted it to be a sparrow again. I wanted to believe that I hadn't helped in draining the life from her.

"Thank you for trying, Diana, but it's too late." She hurried away.

A palm frond tickled my cheek as I watched The Tantrum watch Julie tilt her head back, open her mouth, and swallow an oyster. She'd finally found something to eat. He let out one of his happy-baby giggles, then dipped his forefinger into the bowl of caviar and began to greedily suck it.

I made my way across the room to James. The cinematographer's eyes were now at half-mast. He was using the wall to prop himself up. James peered over his dark glasses at his party as if he were studying a scene he couldn't get right.

"Diana, you finally came over to greet your host," he said as if I had been the flaw.

"It's a lovely party."

"But?" He talked in the quiet, bland tone of a man who was used to dealing with other people's emotions.

"Carol asked me to tell you that she's gone up to the room. Could we talk alone?" I glanced at Marcus, who was now resting his chin on his chest.

James grinned at him. "We are alone. What do you want to talk about? The earrings I gave Julie?"

"You heard?"

"Actors whisper so loudly."

"But you and I know you didn't give them to her."

Marcus muttered what sounded like the word "glare," then slid down the wall and sat on the floor. Since Marcus usually ended up on the floor, no one paid him any attention.

James peered at me over his sunglasses. "When did I stop being a genius, Diana?"

"I'm worried about your wife, not your career." I spoke more bluntly than I had intended.

"So am I. Carol was willing to believe a genius. But she isn't willing to believe a hack. That's why I'm standing here trying to

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figure out when I stopped being a genius. Was it two movies ago?"

"I'm afraid Carol is going to do something drastic."

He tilted his head as if to get a better angle on his career. "How could I not recognize the fact that I'm not a genius anymore? Carol did. Was it three movies ago?"

"You still have it," I lied. "They're talking Oscar for Julie." I had to stop saying that. I had to leave this alone. I had to take my shoes off.

"I have a new project in the works," he said, momentarily forgetting he wasn't a genius anymore. "It's about two men and a buffalo."

"Really?"

"There's the part of a zoologist you're perfect for. I'll get a script to you when we get back to L.A."

"Thanks." So I'd work again. The actor's salvation.

"Strike the glare," Marcus announced, blinking up at us.

"Julie thinks I'm a genius," James observed, adjusting his dark glasses.

"Of course she does."

I was suddenly exhausted. I excused myself and went up to my room.

Around two-thirty in the morning I awoke to someone knocking on my door and the sound of Carol Barron's voice in the hallway. I threw on a robe, turned on the desk lamp, and opened the door. Carol walked in and sat on the sofa. She wore a quilted blue silk bathrobe and stared at the gun in her hand as if she'd picked up the wrong evening bag. "He lost his touch," she said.

Julie appeared in the doorway still dressed in her lime-green gown. "You bitch!" she screamed at Carol. The earrings shimmered. A few hotel guests, disturbed by the noise, peered sleepily out into the hall. I jerked Julie into the room and shut the door.

"What happened?" I demanded.

"Most wives leave. They take the money and leave," Julie said, furiously pacing back and forth.

"Even your pacing is a cliché," Carol observed drily.

"Where's James?" I asked.

"He lost his touch," Carol repeated, rubbing her forehead.

"He's dead. Where do you think he is?!" Julie stamped her foot.

"He's in her bedroom." Carol spoke calmly. "Sprawled on the floor by the bathroom door. He was trying to hide from me in there. Another cliché."

I held out my hand to her. "Give me the gun."

"I can't do that, Diana."

"Give her the gun," Julie demanded.

Carol pointed the barrel of the gun at Julie. "I can't do that until I figure out which one of us is the bigger cliché. The Girlfriend or The Wife?"

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Julie froze, eyes narrowing with fear. "What is she talking about, Diana?"

"She's wondering which one of you is less meaningful, or more hackneyed." My voice sounded unreal, empty of all emotion, like a United Nations interpreter.

"What does that have to do with anything? And how about Diana? She had an affair with him, too," she whined, pointing at me.

"James didn't give her earrings from Tiffany's."

"But I found them in a snowbank."

"Be quiet!" Carol snapped.

Tears began to roll down Julie's cheeks. "It's true. Tell her, Diana."

Carol tilted her drawn, pale face up to mine. "Don't, Diana. Don't tell me. Just get the earrings from her." She waved the gun at me.

I brushed back Julie's hair from her wet face. While she cried I unscrewed the post from behind her left ear and slipped the diamond and emerald earring from her lobe. Then I did the same with the right one. I handed them to Carol.

"You don't want to harm anyone else," I pleaded with her. "Please, give me the gun."

"I have to put an end to it, Diana." She weighed the earrings in her hand. "These insult my intelligence."

"I just thought James could help me with my career. Like Woody Allen and Diane Keaton." Julie was talking frantically now. "I wanted to be a movie star . . . Everybody wants that . . . And everybody has affairs . . . So why do you want to kill me? They're talking Oscar . . . And I did find them in a snowbank . . . I did . . . I did . . ."

"Oh, shut up," Carol said in a weary voice. The gun exploded.

I jerked back. Julie's hands flew up to her face. Carol dropped the gun and grabbed at the bright red wound between her breasts. She pitched forward onto the floor. I knelt down and held her hand; it quivered in mine and then it didn't. I gathered up the earrings.

Peering over her fingertips, Julie began to babble, "She didn't kill me . . . she killed herself . . . not me . . . not me . . ."

I went over and slapped her, hard. Stunned, she fell silent.

I left her. Ignoring the disconcerted expressions of the guests once again peeking from their rooms, I walked down the hall to Julie's suite. The door was ajar. I walked through the sitting room into the bedroom, stepped around the body of the man who had lost his touch, and took the little blue box off her dresser. Placing the earrings inside of it, I dropped the box into the pocket of my robe. I called The Tantrum. He took charge of getting Julie and me new rooms. He gave her sleeping pills so she wouldn't have to talk to the police. It was left for me to deal with them.

In the early dawn I sat alone in my room and stared at the little blue box. I was waiting.

I was waiting for Tiffany's to open. ●

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MELROSE RENDEZVOUS

by William Bankier

James Phoebus sipped the letter slowly, phrase by phrase, like a glass of bad wine. His book manuscript was coming back under separate cover. The editor enjoyed some parts of it but there was too much wrong for it to be fixed. This was the third rejection in four years. No contract, no money coming in.

Sargie the cat was watching him from the chair by the window. She wanted to know what was wrong. "The publisher turned down my novel, Sarge," he said. "All that scribbling with you sitting beside me on the arm of the sofa under the lamp? All for nothing." He got up and touched the keys of the word processor. "I'm not sure I can start another one."

Probably the most prolific *EQMM* short story writer after Edward D. Hoch (approximately 175 stories in *EQMM* alone!), William Bankier is, unlike Mr. Hoch, mostly a non-series author. His latest piece for us takes a look at a writer whose luck is down—and at the lengths to which he will go to reclaim the glory of publication. Mr. Bankier is a Canadian who currently lives in Los Angeles. †

Phoebus went to stand behind the cat, whose nickname was Polar Bear. Together they stared down onto West Hollywood traffic roaring up and down Curson Avenue. "Remember Carol? You used to sleep on her side of the bed and she'd rub your tummy? Carol would say this editor is stupid. But she'd be wrong. The publisher wants good books. If I give them a good book, they'll buy it. Like they used to."

Phoebus went to the closet, took out his blue Laguna Beach cap and put it on, tugging the peak low over his eyes, causing him to raise his chin to a belligerent level. "Another thing Carol would say—walk it off. So I'm going out now, but just for a while. You've got food down. You've got water. Everything's all right." From the doorway he said, "Back soon, Sargie. Back soon."

The green eyes smiled reassuringly as Phoebus closed the door.

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He followed a familiar route down Vista towards Melrose. The Spanish-style stucco bungalows looked secure behind their dwarf palms and bougainvillea. Were the people inside safe against attack? The early afternoon sun was penetrating. Phoebus crossed over to the shady side.

Three years had passed since the road accident outside the school, and Carol's life-insurance money was running low. With her teaching job, she had been a steady provider through the years when his advances and royalties had been unpredictable. She invested part of her salary wisely so that after she died, the fund provided a regular payment. But not enough with everything going up, especially rent.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," her practical voice sounded inside his head. "Get a job." Still in good shape, but going on seventy, Phoebus was not sure what kind of job would allow him to grab two naps a day.

Melrose Avenue was jubilant with kids. Phoebus enjoyed walking among them, being three times their age, four times that of some. They were oiled and cool in tank tops and shades. He liked to think as he swaggered through that they tagged him for some old geezer from the movie industry.

His destination was Bun City, where he would have a large decaf and a cinnamon twist at a sidewalk table. He was still a block from there, passing the classy facade of Alfredo's Trattoria, when it all started to happen.

A shiny black limo pulled up to the curb and men in suits began to get out. They looked in all directions, looked at Phoebus, saw nothing that concerned them. One of them reached down and helped from the car a man Phoebus's age but not his style. This citizen wore a grey silk suit and shiny black shoes, his cropped silver hair as thick as a wolverine's.

Now another car raced to a stop and double-parked beside and partly in front of the limo, blocking its way. The three men who spilled from this vehicle had guns. And suddenly the silver-haired man's companions had guns, too.

Phoebus thought the shooting started almost immediately. He was occupied with one of the attackers, who seized him and pressed him against the wall of the building. The fear that charged him with energy was unlike anything the writer had ever experienced. He was galvanized. He had often imagined himself being slung into the trunk of a car and the lid closed. Was this about to happen? He fought back. The man facing him was short and skinny, in slacks and shirt and tie. There was russet skin and thick black brows over determined eyes. He was glaring at Phoebus, not sure who he was.

Phoebus caught hold of whatever came to hand and slung the

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man across the pavement. The gunman lost his balance and slammed, back first, against the metal column of a parking meter. His head whiplashed and the gun fell from his hand. Phoebus kicked it under the parked limo.

"Yes, there were gunshots," he was able to tell the police who arrived in three LAPD black-and-whites. "I can't remember how many." But one of the attackers was dead, one of the companions of the grey-cropped senior was wounded in the shoulder. The third attacker had fled in the double-parked car. And there was Phoebus's assailant on the sidewalk being fitted by paramedics with a neck brace, lifted onto a board, and thence onto a gurney and into a waiting ambulance.

What Phoebus noticed most clearly was the respect with which the officers treated the old man seated in a doorway of the limo now with his shiny shoes on the curb. They had established Phoebus as a bystander, but the respect overflowed onto him. And when they drove away, there was admiration from the old man's guardians.

"That was Tishman," one of them said as the ambulance departed. "The old guy took out Tishman."

Another one predicted, "You won't see Tishman no more."

The boss raised a hand. The gesture had clear meaning. Phoebus moved forward, still trembling from the fight, and grasped the hand. It was warm and strong.

"Tishman could be lethal," the gentleman said. "Had he stayed on his feet, everything might have been different. He thought you were one of us." Their eyes met and Phoebus felt the fear flow out of him. "Maybe you are."

He was expected to get into the limo, so he did. He sat next to the old man, who felt like a rock. Two of the bodyguards sat facing them on drop seats. The luncheon visit to the Trattoria was cancelled. They were gliding smoothly along Sunset into Beverly Hills. Nobody spoke. The car was full of positive vibrations. Phoebus felt it was as if they had each drunk three brandies.

Now they were rolling onto a gravel courtyard on Upper Crescent Drive. They were facing a greystone mansion with numerous windows and broad steps leading up to massive double doors. A balcony fronted the second level and there, behind a waist-high parapet, stood a woman with dark hair tied in a crimson scarf. As they approached on foot, she raised one hand solemnly like an Indian scout.

"You performed a valuable service," the old man said, speaking for the first time since Melrose. "I look at you and I see a peaceful man not accustomed to fighting."

In high school, Phoebus had once ducked a fight, walking away

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and leaving an amused adversary and a crowd of taunting students. They gave him a new nickname after that. They called him "Feeble." "I was terrified. I thought he was going to slaughter me."

"Fear is a good motivator. In any case, you helped save my life." One of the guards pushed open the heavy doors and stood back. "I want you to come into my house and sit with me and take some food and drink."

The party moved forward into a vestibule facing a carpeted stairway that curved up and out of sight. Phoebus confronted himself in a gold-framed mirror. He was grinning foolishly, he thought. A portrait of the old man stared down from halfway up the stairs. The ornate furnishings, the fittings, seemed like a movie set. The host read his mind. He said, "People came here and scouted all this for a motion picture. *The Thomas Crown Affair.* I was just as happy when they chose someplace else."

The bodyguards had gone away. Phoebus and the old man were seated in a room with a fireplace separating floor-to-ceiling shelves of books. Between their wingback chairs was a low glass table upon which a servant had placed trays of crudités: assorted cheeses, an array of crackers, crystal bowls of black and green olives. The carrots, celery, green onions, and radishes were pleasingly arranged in bursts and circles.

Introductions finally had occurred. His host was Carl Hammerfield, CEO of Danapaul Industries. "This is real food," he said, crunching a carrot and swallowing white wine from a tulip glass. "When I eat raw foods I can feel my stomach thanking me. May I call you James?"

"By all means."

"Tell me more, James, about your writing. I find it amazing that a man I encountered today through such unusual circumstances turns out to be an author. I have a reason for asking. Tell me more."

Phoebus ignored his four-year dry spell. He said, "I've had fourteen books published over a thirty-year career. Historical novels. For example, Edgar Allan Poe. I called the book *The Search for Annabel Lee.* Research takes me about a year. Then another ten months to complete the work."

"Have you ever written a biography?"

"Not yet. I've thought about it."

"Would you consider writing mine?"

His heart began to pound. Phoebus had always been an optimist. His life-long belief was that something positive might be approaching around the next corner. And here it was. This man was rich as Croesus. He could pay the writer up-front. If neces-

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sary, he could pay to have it published. "Would I consider writing your bio? Carl, I'd consider it an honor and a privilege."

They talked until sundown. Phoebus made a few notes, but most of that could come later. It turned out the Hammerfield family had acquired their wealth through unlawful activities. The patriarch arrived from Europe in 1908 as Jonas Hinterfeld. He became involved in bootlegging during Prohibition—the legislative gambit that proved such a boon to so many entrepreneurs outside the law. Jonas built a small empire which provided lucrative employment for a tribe of relatives arriving from the old country. When alcohol once again became legal, the company evolved into real estate and other legal operations. Along the way, Hinterfeld became Hammerfield. Today, a new generation was involved in Web sites and E-Trading.

"Most of the family lives back East," the old man concluded. "I took over California thirty years ago." He got up and went to a credenza, returning with a photograph in a silver frame. Phoebus saw a middle-aged man posed stiffly in a suit with many buttons. Dark eyes frowned above a crisp cavalry-style moustache.

Phoebus smiled and nodded. "Jonas?"

"Himself."

"A ladies' man?"

"To the end."

"Who is the woman I saw on the balcony when we came in?"

"My sister, Sarah. She keeps to herself."

A well-groomed young man in a dark pinstripe suit entered the room after knocking. He was carrying some files. "You wanted me to remind you, Carl. The San Francisco estimates . . ."

"Thank you, Joey. Joey, meet James Phoebus. James is a published author and he's agreed to write my biography. This is my associate, Joey Danuto. Nothing would get done around here without Joey."

They were all standing. Phoebus was shaking hands. Danuto regarded him with respect. "I heard what you did down on Melrose."

"I got lucky."

"We all depend on luck."

They escorted the visitor to the front door. One of the guards was assigned to drive him home. It was a surreal experience to sit alone in the limo and begin rolling across the gravel courtyard to the gateway on Crescent Drive. The woman from the balcony was waiting by the iron gate. She raised both hands and the car came to a stop. Phoebus pressed a button to lower the window.

Framed in the aperture, her face was tanned, the blue eyes wide and wild. Phoebus guessed her age somewhere in the early fifties.

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She had taken the red scarf from her smooth black hair and held it now knotted between her hands.

"I was listening," she said, "I heard everything."

All he could think of to say was, "My name is James Phoebus."

"Will you be coming here often?"

"I think so."

"We'll meet again. I have much to tell you."

She backed away from the window and stood watching as the limo drove away.

"Sargie, our ship has come in." The cat was leaning against his leg, her tail raised in a question mark. "Are you in contact with Carol's soul? Please let her know this good thing has happened. Truth be told, I believe the Hammerfield individual could be dangerous. There's no doubt enemies want to kill him. But that needn't affect us."

The telephone rang. Phoebus went to answer, looking down through the front window onto Curson Avenue. A good citizen had two miniature dachshunds on leashes and was picking up their droppings with a plastic bag turned inside out on her hand.

"Are you in some sort of trouble, James?" It was Nettie Fazenda, his ancient neighbor in Apartment 3.

"Not that I know of. Why do you ask, Ned?"

"They brought you home in that big black car." Nettie had played minor roles—dance-hall girls and hash-house floozies—in dozens of films back in the days when Hollywood was turning them out one a week and it cost fifty grand to make a movie. "I was afraid it was the police."

"Police cars are black and white."

"Detectives ride in unmarked cars."

"Well, this was just my new boss. I've got a writing assignment, Ned. I was just telling Sarge. Our ship has come in."

"That's wonderful. You deserve some good luck."

They nattered on for half an hour. When the MC announces the nominees for loneliest retired actress, the Fazenda name will lead all the rest.

He began driving twice a week to the Beverly Hills mansion in his '88 Hyundai Excel with the battered side panel. This damage was self-inflicted. Entering a parking lot one day, taking a ticket from the machine and driving under the rising barrier, he pulled a cavalier right turn with one hand and wrapped the passenger side of the car around an iron bollard that protected cars parked on the other side of it. This humiliating misadventure had happened years ago, and Phoebus still squirmed when he remembered it. He had two reasons for not getting the damage repaired: It would cost

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hundreds he did not have, and, moreover, he believed a renovated vehicle was an invitation to a major freeway collision.

The sessions with the old man were interesting and pleasurable. Hammerfield seemed genuinely happy to see him. As Phoebus ran his tape recorder, his subject went on in a stream-of-consciousness way about everything from childhood escapades to business confrontations occurring last winter. School certificates were produced along with numerous photographs and a family Bible containing pen-and-ink notations of births, deaths, and weddings. Phoebus was encouraged to take these artifacts home for perusal.

On the occasion of a later visit, as he was packing up the recorder, the old man took a car key from the credenza and handed it to Phoebus. "Joey Danuto tells me you could use a new vehicle. There's a white two thousand one Saturn parked beside the house. The pink slip, registration, and insurance certificate are in the glove compartment."

"Wow, Carl . . . !" Phoebus was overwhelmed. "I don't know what to say."

"I can see how excited you are. That pleases me. Drive it in safety and the best of health."

On his way out of the library he met Joey Danuto heading in. Raising the key, he said, "Thanks for this."

"You deserve it. Want an update on Tishman?"

"Yes, please."

"He's in a wheelchair. Paralyzed from the waist down. He'll never walk again." Danuto grinned. "We like that more than if you'd killed him."

Phoebus drove the Hyundai alongside the Saturn and began shifting his stuff from the old trunk to the new one. As he was doing this, Sarah walked up quietly behind him. "I have the information."

"You startled me!" She was extending a large brown envelope, so he took it.

"I've written down a number of things that happened between me and my brother. And other people. There's more but you can start with this."

"Okay, I'll read it when I get home." He tossed the envelope into the trunk. "Then I'll decide what I can use."

"You'll use every word of it if you're truly a writer. But if you're a puppy-dog hack, you'll pretend you never saw it." Her continued presence, eyes holding his, made it difficult for Phoebus to go on with what he was doing. "My brother disapproved of the man I married. Otto Redmond. He played tenor sax in a club I liked to go to years ago. It's closed now. He was black. We ran away to Vegas to have the ceremony. We couldn't live in this house. Carl made it too uncomfortable."

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"Sarah, I really have to get going."

"Otto used to beat on me. Not very much, I could take it. I provoked him. And he was from a different culture. A husband putting hands on his wife is not the end of the world. One day I came here with bruises on my face. I told Carl how it happened, it was no big deal. Know what my brother did?"

"What?"

"His people picked up Otto and drove him into the desert. He never came back."

"Did you tell the police?"

"Are you joking? The police belong to Carl Hammerfield. He gives them money and cocaine."

Sarah Redmond's story occupied Phoebus's mind during the drive home. He slipped the new car into his slot under the building overhang and, after getting out, stood admiring the way it looked.

Nettie Fazenda leaned out of her doorway and said, "Is that your new car?"

"Sure is. I had to get rid of the old one. The body in the trunk was becoming obvious."

Sargie gave him hell as soon as he entered the apartment. She had a point. Her bowl of crunchies was half empty and there were hairs floating in her water bowl. He took care of these matters and by the time he was sitting at the table by the window with the Redmond papers in hand, the cat took up her tucked position where she could keep an eye on him and on the traffic in the street below.

Sarah's pages were all written in pencil in a neat script Phoebus had not seen since Grade Three. There was a brief reference to the kidnapping and murder of Otto Redmond. After that, he found himself reading a litany of similar crimes and misdemeanors. The horrendous nature of these events dried up his mouth. Business competitors were given one chance to cooperate. Among those who did not, a residence would burn down, delivery trucks would be hijacked. Industrial espionage led to the theft of product developments. Most shocking of all, a troublesome man was locked in the trunk of his car and driven to a remote area of the Angeles National Forest where the vehicle was torched with the occupant still alive.

Sarah gave chapter and verse on these events. She named names and listed dates. Phoebus put his hand on the back of the white cat. Her fur was warm from the reading lamp. "What do I do now, Sargie? This woman tells me the truth about her brother. I'm doing a whitewash job on the guy. It's well written, that's the way I work. But boy, is it dull! Can you reach Carol? What's her opinion?"

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The cat shifted positions slightly, never losing the level eye contact between them. They sat that way for several minutes. "Well, that's true, of course," he murmured at last. "I've been given five grand up-front and the money is fine. But she's right, Sarge. Never did I say I would sell my soul."

Phoebus tried something the next time he and Hammerfield were together. This was over a meal at a club on the Sunset Strip. "You've seen the chapters I've completed and we're both happy with them."

"More than happy."

"But here's the thing, Carl. There's no tension, nothing to grab the reader. It's like a eulogy."

"What are you suggesting?"

"You've only told me the good things. Everybody's life has bad things, too. Why not tell me some of those? It would make you more of a real person."

Hammerfield's smile faded just enough to show Phoebus the iron frame beneath it. He shook his head. "Just keep doing what you're doing. There are enough nasty books. Mine will be life as it should be."

James Phoebus worked on throughout the summer and into the Pacific autumn. A publisher had seen the nearly-completed manuscript and was eager to rush it into print. A few more weeks and the job would be done.

On a mild afternoon, he put Sargie into her travel box with the familiar folded towel on the bottom. They drove to the coast highway and he parked beside Santa Monica pier. The cat tended to be calm in new surroundings but, just in case, he had dressed her in her powder-blue collar and attached it to a leash.

The pier was not crowded on this weekday afternoon. Phoebus lifted Sargie and balanced her on a wooden railing. Breakers rolled in onto the beach below. A few surfers in wet suits made awkward attempts to ride inadequate waves. Seeing them fall, he told the cat, "I'm not James Feeble anymore."

Sargie was fascinated by the soaring, swooping gulls. He kept both hands on her, the leash around his wrist, but she made no attempt to go anywhere. He told her, "You and I are going to leave all this. The book comes out next month. Mr. Hammerfield is going to be very angry. But the publisher is doing a big printing. And I'm getting a large check."

He put his cheek to her side, soft as a rabbit. "What would you say to New Orleans?"

Phoebus gave the required one-month notice on his apartment.

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Movers arrived and packed his stuff for storage. The less Nettie Fazenda knew, the better. Who could say whether Hammerfield might send people to question his neighbors.

"I've been working hard for months," he told her. "The book is coming out. And this is for you—I've signed it."

He handed her one of his advance copies. The title was *The Hammerfield Story: See No Evil.* Nettie registered delight, running a hand through her grey perm. "This is marvelous. True crime? You should make it into a movie. I know people . . ."

"The movie has already been made. Brando was great. So were Pacino and De Niro." He was on his way to the car, Sargie stored once again in her airy transporter. "Anyway, we're off to a new life in San Francisco. If anybody asks you, I'll be at the Atlantic Hotel on Lombard Street until I find a permanent place." Let Fazenda spread the false scent!

Before leaving, Phoebus had telephoned Sarah Redmond at the private number she had given him. "You'll be seeing the finished product soon. I want to thank you for your contribution. I used almost everything."

"Good!" She said it emphatically.

"By the way, I didn't credit you. I didn't want your brother coming after you."

"He can't hurt me anymore," Sarah said.

From a pay phone in the Vieux Carre, not far from his hotel near the Desire Oyster Bar, Phoebus dialed the number of Carl Hammerfield. Reactions to his book in the press had been outstanding. He was curious to hear the opinion of the old man himself, and to gauge his anger. Carl's reaction surprised him.

"You've run away for nothing, James. Sarah told me what you'd done. She's a spiteful girl, she couldn't wait for me to find out. My people in New York acquired an advance copy and sent it to me. I think it's brilliant. You were absolutely right."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course. This is the new millennium. Everybody is out of the closet."

"I may come back, then. I haven't begun to look for an apartment and my cat hates the hotel room."

"Sarah has two cats. Did she get around to telling you that?"

Phoebus's landlord was glad to hear from him. Of course he could move back in. The movers were instructed to bring his stuff back from storage. The landlord agreed to open the door for them and see his things in place. Back went Sargie into the travel box and they hit the road west in the new Saturn. Several days later, the

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white cat was staring down imperiously onto Curson Avenue from her familiar place by the window.

Next morning, with a copy of the book under his arm, Phoebus took his routine walk down Vista to Melrose. Rush hour was over and traffic was calm. The stucco cottages had been washed by a light rain and lush greenery was steaming under brilliant sunshine.

He arrived at Bun City just after ten and took a sidewalk table. His decaf and cinnamon twist arrived in the capable hands of Deena, his favorite waitress. She glanced at the book cover and he informed her it was his.

"Wow," she said. "That's cool."

Turning pages, sipping and eating, Phoebus figured this was about as good as it gets. He was in love with everybody and everything, the cars rolling past in both directions, the young locals on the broad sidewalk standing out among the tourists.

A man in a wheelchair approached, pushed along by a male nurse in white pants, shirt, and shoes. The man was emaciated, head hanging to one side, slack-jawed. As the chair reached the sidewalk enclosure, the nurse stopped pushing, the patient reached under his lap rug and drew out a pistol with a silencer. Then Tishman—for it was he—fired four shots quickly into Phoebus's chest and head.

The writer was dead before his face hit the table. He did not see the nurse push the chair rapidly to the corner where a limo was waiting with Joey Danuto by the open door. Danuto helped the nurse load Tishman quickly into the backseat while another guard folded the chair and slung it into the trunk. The car turned the corner and was gone.

When word came that her neighbor was dead, the first thing Nettie Fazenda did was go and rescue the cat. She let herself into the apartment using the key he had given her for this purpose. Whenever he flew to New York to see his publisher, Nettie would cat-sit.

"It's going to be all right, Sargie," she said as she gathered up litter box, tins of food, brushes, and other implements. "You'll be living with me now." She wondered how much the cat knew. There was a look in those green eyes. "Yes, he's gone to be with his Carol."

It was three weeks later, after the funeral, when a handsome lady with a red scarf showed up at the Fazenda front door. She identified herself as Sarah Redmond, sister of Carl Hammerfield. "James told me about his lovely cat. And how lucky he was to have you living so close by." Phoebus had done more than describe the cat to Sarah. He had revealed that the cat was the sole beneficiary of his Last Will and Testament.

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"So I thought I'd come and pick her up. I know she'll get on well with my two lovelies."

Being a solitary and somewhat haunted individual who looked in the mirror every day, Nettie Fazenda knew a crazy woman when she saw one. "I don't think so," she said. "James was very clear with me on this subject. If anything happened to him, Sargie was to come to me. Thank you and goodbye." The abruptly closed door put an end to any further discussion on the matter.

Two months later, the retired actress was pleasantly surprised when confirmation of Sargie's status as heiress arrived in the mail. The letter was from Phoebus's lawyer. Royalties from the sale of his book represented greater wealth than she had seen since her salad days in Hollywood.

Best of all was the cat's reaction. Told about the windfall, Sargie made eye contact with Nettie and conveyed what was coming through from James Phoebus on the other side. He was more than happy that his cat was living with his neighbor. And, yes, he wanted them to share the wealth. ●

So She Married the Earl of Fenlyn

by Harry Hopkinson

So she married the Earl of Fenlyn
To make her cash-grubbing parents real proud;
'Though the Earl was maxed out on avoirdupois
With the minimum brain-weight allowed.

Friends said she was heading for heartache
And were wishing the wedding would stop,
But she had a hidden agenda in mind
With a plan which would keep her on top.

So she married the Earl of Fenlyn
With his mansion, his jewels, and his yacht.
She knew she'd enjoy all these things as his wife,
But much more as his widow, she thought.

She took her wide Earl in a narrow canoe
And then artfully toppled the boat.
Too bad! The one thing that she failed to compute
Was how well all that blubber could float!

So she married the Earl of Fenlyn,
Now despising him more by the ounce.
She's planning a climb in the Austrian Alps,
Just to see if the sucker will bounce.

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Art by Laurie Harden

HEARTBREAKER

by Ed Gorman

Black River Falls, Iowa, has only one art gallery and that is located in the Lucky Star Drive-In Theater, in the concession stand.

The more prominent galleries in the big cities may have Picasso and Vermeer and Van Gogh, but the Lucky Star has three walls covered with movie posters for such forthcoming pictures as *Lost, Lonely, and Vicious; Live Fast, Die Young;* and *Eighteen and Anxious.*

Plus, the Lucky Star art gallery has wonderful aromas. How can you beat the smells of fresh popcorn, hot dogs, and pizza?

I was here tonight for "The Biggest Thrills of Summer 1958!!!" That was what the ad headline read in the paper this afternoon. It was indeed summer 1958, and I was indeed ready to be thrilled. You'll note the three exclamation points. They only use three when they really mean it.

It was a triple bill tonight, with *Teenage Thunder, Dragstrip Girl,* and *Hot Rod Gang.* I'd just seen *Teenage Thunder* and it was one of those movies that are so bad they're good. Not a real actor in sight

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and a script as incoherent as a press conference with President Eisenhower.

What I was doing presently, in addition to polishing off a chili dog, was waiting for my turn at the pay phone.

I was at the drive-in tonight waiting for Judge Anne Esme Whitney to tell me where I was to go and when I should go there. As the town's least successful lawyer—everybody keeps assuring me this is because I'm only twenty-four and not because I have a baby face and am shorter than Alan Ladd—I have to supplement my income by being Judge Whitney's court investigator. I even picked up my private investigator's license for the job.

Shamus Award winner Ed Gorman has been very influential in the mystery field over the past two decades. Not only does he produce some of the most original stories and novels in the genre, he is also an editor and the co-publisher of the leading mystery news journal, *Mystery Scene Magazine*. Mr. Gorman's writing ranges from hardboiled to cozy. If you enjoy this '50's whodunit, try the new book in the series, *Save the Last Dance for Me* (Carroll & Graf). ¶

Finally, the phone was free. I lunged at it, dropped in a nickel, dialed her number.

"It's about time," she said.

"You said to call you at nine-thirty."

"It's nine thirty-four."

"Ah."

"You need to leave right now."

"I'm ready."

"Do you know her sister Molly?"

"Seen her around."

"She'll be waiting for you at that ridiculous place where the girls bring you your food on roller skates."

There was a lot wrong with that sentence—the food isn't on roller skates, the carhops are—but one doesn't correct Judge Whitney unless one wants to end one's life abruptly.

"Debbie's Dogs."

"My God," she said. "There's just no dignity left in this town. Those girls should be ashamed of themselves, wearing shorts that short. And their parents should be fined."

"How about hanged?"

"Aren't we the cute one tonight, McCain?" I could picture her as she sneered this—fashion-model thin, stylish in a silk dressing gown, one of her constant brandies in one hand and one of her constant Galouises in the other. There is no American cigarette as strong as a Galouise. They make your lungs beg for mercy.

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The judge comes from old Eastern money. Her family fled out here nearly a hundred years ago following a financial scandal. They virtually built this town and ran it until the Sykes clan took it over after the war. The judge flees back East as often as possible, where, with her family connections, she often dines with people such as Leonard Bernstein, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Cole Porter. But for all her worldliness, she's a prude when it comes to "the kids," as she disdainfully calls them. Four marriages of her own, but nary a "kid" was produced.

"Pick her up there and she'll take you where you need to go."

Through the window I could see the screen going dark and that wonderful phrase "Coming Attractions" blooming into visibility. Most things are better anticipated than realized. I've always wished there was a theater that showed nothing but coming attractions.

"You need to stop him, McCain. He's a public menace." Pause. "That's my other phone, McCain. Let me know what happens."

Debbie's Dogs was so crowded cars were parked in the street waiting their turn at one of the drive-up slots. You could hear Fats Domino, Elvis, and Gene Vincent all at the same time from competing car radios. There were a number of street rods there tonight, including a 1939 Ford Phaeton that would have made me swoon if I was the swooning type.

And the shorts were indeed short. The roller-skating waitresses were high-school girls who had obviously been selected for their looks. White blouses, teeny-tiny black shorts, white roller skates, and perky little red hats with plastic hot dogs atop them.

Molly Evans was one of those wan, blond, thin girls whose appeal isn't apparent right away. The pink blouse and pink pedal pushers were loose on her, and her eyeglasses gave her a studious, squinty look. The pink barrettes were the sort little girls wore.

But as we sped away and I glanced at her a few times, I saw a glimmer of her older sister Rita's beauty. An erotic mouth, a jut of breast, an elegance of wrist and fingers, a slender, perfect ankle.

"This is a cool car, Mr. McCain."

I wouldn't disagree with that. Red '51 Ford ragtop. "Thanks. And please just call me Sam."

"We're headed out to the river road. Then we go to Hartson Hill."

Drag racing. That's where everybody went. A long, flat stretch of seldom-traveled blacktop leading to a trestle bridge. Drag racers had been slamming into that bridge since way back in the 1920s. Slamming into it and dying. Bing Crosby and jazz; the Andrew Sisters and World War Two; Johnny Ray and the postwar years. Styles came and went but the bridge remained.

"My folks said to be sure and tell you how much they appreciate this."

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"The judge said you'd explain."

She sighed, dug into the pocket of her pedal pushers, took out a Viceroy, cupped her hand skillfully over match and cigarette tip, and got the smoke going.

Frankie Avalon was on the radio. She pointed to it and said, "You mind?"

I shook my head. Buddy Holly, I would've minded. Little Richard, I would've minded. Frankie Avalon, fine by me.

Full moon. Breeze finally cooling the August heat down. Small houses small-town dark now that it was after nine o'clock.

She said, "What happened, Rita ran away from home three nights ago. She's staying with this waitress she knows. Dad's been over there four or five times but she always hides and the waitress lies and says Rita isn't there."

"Why'd she run away?"

"Because Dad and Mom found they just couldn't take it anymore with Rick. He's never been true to her. He's always gone back and forth between her and Evvie since they were all in ninth grade. He just breaks it off whenever he feels like it. And then she goes crazy. She just goes all to pieces."

"What do your folks want me to do?"

"Just talk to her, try and sort of reason with her. They're desperate."

They must be, I thought. This was a hopeless mission.

The scene out at Hartson Hill, which was named for a deserted farmhouse, resembled the painting for *Dragstrip Gang,* one of the movie posters in the Lucky Star art gallery.

It looked as if every single James Dean imitator in town was out here tonight, all gussied up in red nylon jackets and white T-shirts and tight jeans. The girls were various versions of Natalie Wood, even the blondes, skirts and bobbysox and saddle shoes and the kind of sweaters you see on paperback crime novels.

There were maybe a dozen cars parked along the roadside. The two cars that were going to race were several hundred feet ahead. Headlights pierced the prairie darkness and revealed the edges of ripe cornfields. Rock-and-roll blared loud, and boys and girls alike acted out little bits of business they'd seen in drive-in movies about juvenile delinquents. Heady, hormonal stuff. A bit of me envied them. I was old enough to know better.

You didn't have to study Rita's beauty to feel its full impact. It attacked you. Bountiful where Molly was slender, knowing and confident where Molly was hesitant, theatrical where Molly was quiet, Rita in her black blouse and tight jeans was *fatale* in her femininity.

She was lighting two cigarettes, one for herself, one for Rick. He

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leaned back against his chopped and channeled '49 Mercury—black, of course—and let her place it between his lips.

He saw me and said, "What's he doing here? He's the jerk who works for Judge Whitney."

Rita had been busy playing the movie scene with Rick. When she saw her sister and me, she swore. "Oh, great. Dad sent you here, didn't he, Molly?"

"Sam wants to talk to you," Molly said. She went over and stood next to Rita, leaning against Rick's Merc. "Alone."

"If he tries to, I'll put him in the hospital," Rick said.

I guess I should tell you here that in fifth grade the very athletic Judy O'Hara beat me up. Bloody nose, black eye. Said I tripped her when we played basketball. I'm tougher than that today—I saw Judy a week ago at the grocery store and she was on crutches from a boating accident so I imagine I could whip her—but I doubted I could take Rick.

"C'mon, you guys," a girl with a camera said. "Remember you said you'd give me a picture. Rita, you stand next to Rick, and Evvie, you stand next to Marv."

Marv Haggarty was apparently the other racer. He had a practiced Elvis sneer and a swagger that threatened to break into dance.

"You lucked out, counselor," Rick said. "Otherwise, you'd be in traction." He reached behind Rita and picked up a bottle of Pepsi from the hood. Took a big swig and said, "Let's get this picture business over with. I'm here to race, man."

Straight out of *Dragstrip Gangs,* if I wasn't mistaken.

"Say cheese."

Both Rick and Marv enunciated dirty words.

"Let's do it, man," Marv said, after the three pictures had been snapped. "This time, I'm gonna win."

"We'll see," Rick smiled. "Losin' six in a row to me isn't nothin' to be ashamed of, Marv." Marv did not look amused.

"You better not be here when I get back," Rick said to me.

"Maybe I'll get lucky and you won't *be* back."

"You better hope you're right, lawyer-man."

He got in his Merc. It was a beautiful car. Marvelous Marv was behind his wheel, too.

There was a fight, but it wasn't between Rick and me or Marv and me but between Rita and Evvie, a slender, alluring redhead in shorts even shorter than those the girls at the drive-up wore.

The girls were pushing each other.

"You waved the flag last time," Evvie said.

"So? Rick said I could wave it again this time."

The flag. The girl stands between the two cars on the line and signals them with a handkerchief to start racing.

"Hey, cool," a boy with a pompadour said, "a chick fight."

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Rick banged twice on the door. Revved his engine loud. "Hey, ladies, we're here to race, remember? Let Evvie do it this time, baby."

"But you promised, Rick," Rita said.

Now Marv started revving his engine, too.

"Bitch," Rita said, and gave Evvie a hard shove and then stalked away.

Evvie started after her, but Rick said, "C'mon, Evvie. Let's go, man!"

There was half a car-length between the two cars. Evvie stood in front of them at an invisible starting line. The crowd encircled the cars. It seemed divided pretty evenly in its enthusiasm, each group shouting encouragement to its favorite. The smell of gas and oil, the roar of glas-pak mufflers, the trembling power of the souped-up engines. Illegal as hell, unmistakably foolish, profoundly exciting.

Evvie raised her hand, a yellow scarf dangling from it. "Ready! Set! Go!"

They took off so quickly they were fishtailing for a good two hundred feet. The group was jumping up and down and screaming as the cars become shadow-shapes and shrinking taillights in the distance. It was funny, the bridge never got any smaller, but the cars did. By the time they reached it, they had blended with the night.

The bridge was one-lane, of course. That's what made it so dangerous. Only one car could fit. The other could fly off the bank into the river or chicken out, slamming on the brakes as the bridge approached.

Rick's car did neither. It hit the side of the bridge at upwards of ninety miles an hour.

There was that moment of silence after the terrible sounds of the collision. And then, frantic animals, the sounds of all of us shouting and screaming and running down the asphalt to where Rick almost certainly lay dying.

That first morning, I did something I very badly didn't want to do. I visited the two maiden aunts who'd raised Rick Drew from age six, after his folks had been killed in a car accident. It was a drab gray two-story frame house. Emma and Amy Drew I'd known from church for many years. Theirs was a house of doilies, Irish knick-knacks of every description, a dozen small statues of the Virgin and assorted saints, the tiniest TV screen I'd ever seen—as if they didn't really want it—oilcloth on the kitchen table, and a refrigerator so old the motor was on top—a house out of time, such as you saw on the old Laurel and Hardys they ran on Saturday mornings.

Amy and I sat at the kitchen table. She was also working-class dignity and grace, the dignity and grace that can only come from hard work and thousands of disappointments borne without breaking.

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"We shouldn't have raised him, Mr. McCain."

"You used to call me Sam, Amy."

"But now you're all grown up and a lawyer." I had left the working class, was what she was saying; I was now in the realm of all those "misters" she'd known and distrusted down the years. I don't think she distrusted me, but the warmth was gone. "Two women raising a wild, handsome boy like that. But what else could we do? We were his only relatives in the whole state."

"The next couple of days, please think about anything he might've said. Somebody who was after him, somebody who hated him."

A weary smile: "A lot of boys hated him. He was a heartbreaker and the girls seemed to love that." Then: "I can't think of anything right off the top."

"Will you ask Emma?"

She shook her narrow gray head. "Right now she couldn't put a thought together if she tried. She's been crying like that since last night. I'll ask her when she feels better."

As I left, I saw a framed photo of Rick Drew when he must've been around eleven. Bastard that he'd been—not bright, not tough, not the sort of boy other boys liked, his only power being women—his interior life, raised as he'd been by two old maids, couldn't have been easy.

"You missed a good one last night," I said to the beautiful Pamela Forrest two mornings later.

"Juvenile delinquents?"

"Yeah, but this actually had some good acting in it."

"Good actors wouldn't be in a movie like that, McCain. You must've brought some beer along. You know how you get. Your two-beer limit and everything."

I've been in love with the beautiful Pamela Forrest since grade school. She, in turn, has been in love with the wealthy and handsome Stu Grant for just about as long. Stu, the county attorney, announced a year ago that he plans to become Republican governor in just a few years. He announced this with his wife and children at his side, which presents a certain problem for the beautiful Pamela Forrest.

"Besides," she said, "I'm reading a novel about this nun who volunteers to work in this leper colony and then falls in love with the doctor who runs it."

"Ah," I said.

"Stu told me he likes women who read serious books. He caught me reading one of your John D. MacDonald books and said that it would ruin my reputation if anybody saw me with it."

Rich guy, county attorney, looming gubernatorial candidate, adulterer, and now literary critic. That Stu was some guy.

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I would have given her my opinion of Stu except the buzzer linking her office with Judge Whitney's inner sanctum sounded and the judge said, "Send him in, Pamela, and get back to your typing."

"Yes, Judge."

Pamela made a face. And stage-whispered, "She's not in a very good mood."

"Gosh," I said, "how unlike her."

The Supreme Court justices would envy Judge Whitney's digs. She had them designed and built at her own expense when she was first appointed to the bench. The finest mahogany wainscoting. Imported European carpeting covered in places with genuine Persian rugs. Long, narrow, mullioned windows overlooking the courthouse grounds, and enough law books to stock a university library. The judge herself was perched on the edge of her baronial desk, Galouise in one hand, brandy glass in the other.

As I took my leather chair, she set her glass down, tucked the cigarette in the corner of her mouth, and launched the first of the rubber bands—thumb and forefinger—at my face.

She faked me out, feigning left, then abruptly catching me by firing right. It caught on my nose and hung there for a moment.

"Now that would make a nice photo for your alumni magazine, McCain. For that place you went to."

"The University of Iowa."

"Oh, yes. Smith and Yale myself."

"I don't believe you've mentioned that more than several thousand times."

She walked around behind her desk, sat down, leaned forward, snatched up her brandy glass again. She is a most fetching fifty-some-year-old woman, elegant as the gray Oleg Cassini suits she wears. She buys them by the half-dozen on her New York excursions.

"Three days and no murderer, McCain. Are we going to let Cliffie win this one?"

The only way the judge can aggrieve the Sykes clan these days is by proving what an inept bumpkin our police chief, Cliffie Sykes, Jr., is. He invariably arrests the wrong person, and we invariably prove him wrong.

"He hasn't arrested anyone yet, Your Honor."

"No, but he's about to."

"Who?"

"God, McCain, have you been sleeping for the past three days? He's zeroed in on Rita."

I'd spent the three days since Rick's death concentrating, logically enough, on Marv Haggarty. Rick's death had been no accident. Somebody—say somebody Rick constantly beat at drag-racing—had cut the hose to his brakes.

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"I'm not clairvoyant, Judge," I said. And received another rubber band for my trouble. This one brushed my ear. She was good. "How do you know he's focusing on Rita?"

"Because her mother called me late last night, very upset. Cliffie dragged Rita down to the station and interrogated her for three hours. He all but accused her of it."

"But Rita was his girlfriend. Why would she kill him?"

"He'd been telling everybody he was going to break up with her. I guess he was already seeing that Evvie girl. And I guess Rita knew all about this. They'd had a big argument that afternoon with a lot of people standing around."

I got out of there before she could launch another rubber band.

"You didn't tell me about your argument with Rick," I said, half an hour later, to Rita. We were on the Evans's sun porch. It sure was sunny. "No wonder Cliffie thinks you did it."

I'd talked to Rita twice in the past three days. I'd thought that if anybody could identify Rick's enemies it would be Rita. Her lovely face was pinched, dark half-moons beneath her eyes.

"He didn't mention anything about his brake line possibly being cut by Marv Haggarty?"

"No."

Molly, wan as ever, came out onto the porch and sat on the flowered summer rocker. She held some photos in her hand. She said to her sister, "Debbie took these the other night out at Hartson Hill. She thought maybe we'd want some copies."

"May I see one of those?"

"Sure, Mr. McCain."

She handed one over. The scene was familiar, of course. Rick and Rita, Marv and Evvie. Molly inadvertently in the left corner of the photo.

"I'd like to keep this."

"Sure, Mr. McCain." Shy grin. "I guess I forgot to call you Sam."

"Is there anything else—anything—you haven't told me, Rita?"

She whispered, "No. No." And then started crying. Molly took her in her arms.

Around four that afternoon, I got lucky. I got a call at the office from a mechanic out at the DX service station. He identified himself as Jay Norbert and said that the afternoon of the drag race, he'd worked on Rick Drew's car. When he was finished with it, he parked it to the side of the garage, where Rick was to pick it up later. About an hour after he parked it there he saw, through the garage window, Marv Haggarty running away from Drew's car. He went out and started to check everything over but then was interrupted by his boss, who was raising hell about jobs piling up.

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When Rick came in he told him about this, but Rick checked the car out and didn't find anything. Jay said that he realized now that what Marv had done was cut the line in such a way that it would lose fluid very slowly. Imperceptibly. But by nighttime enough fluid had leaked out to lose strong braking, especially when the car was moving that fast.

"Why didn't you tell me this right away?"

"Jay Norbert? The name don't mean nothin' to you?"

"Vaguely, I guess."

"Armed robbery. Seven years in Anamosa. I just got out four months ago. About the last thing I want to do is get involved in somethin' like this. Next thing I know, Cliffie'd be sayin' I did it. You know how people are about ex-cons."

The hell of it was, what he said was true.

Marvelous Marv was washing his car when I pulled into the driveway of his trailer. The bikini'd Evvie was sprawled breasts-up on a vast nubby towel, sunning herself. Her dark glasses gave her a touch of Hollywood in the cornfields.

"You're under arrest, Marv."

"Hey, funny stuff, counselor. You're a regular card. You hear him, Evvie? He's a regular card."

"Tell him to bug off, Marv."

He was spraying the car with water and rainbows. The water smelled clean. He thumbed the nozzle of the hose, stopping the spray. "You're gonna get a shower if you don't get outta here, man."

I was carrying my dad's Army .45, the one he'd brought back from the war in Europe. Evvie had apparently been watching behind her shades. She sat straight up. "Hey, you can't—"

But I could. And did.

"Here's your man, Cliffie. A mechanic named Jay Norbert'll give you the testimony you need."

Cliffie always wears khaki uniforms because that's what Glenn Ford always wears in his adventure movies. Cliffie thinks *he's* Glenn Ford. Personally, I think I'm Robert Ryan, my favorite actor, which I pretty much am except for the talent, the looks, and the height.

"Jay Norbert's an ex-con," Cliffie said. His feet were up on the desk and he had a cigarillo tucked in the corner of his mouth and his white Stetson pushed back on his head just the way Glenn would have worn it.

"He's on his way down," I said. "I've already called Stu Grant and told him all this. He's on his way over. He wants to be in on the interrogation. You have a way of screwing things up."

I turned to the door and Cliffie said, "Isn't Stu Grant the fella that Pamela Forrest is all hot and bothered by?"

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"You should hear all the stuff he says about you, cousin Cliffie," Marv Haggarty said.

Cliffie smirked. "I want to hear everything he said, cousin Marv. Every single word."

Cliffie has more relatives in town than even the judge. I hadn't known that Marv was his kin. Marv would be walking the streets in less than an hour, no matter what county attorney Stu Grant said to the contrary. But then it would be his problem.

I called the judge, who was home. She said that in light of foiling Cliffie once again, she just might start drinking martinis a little earlier than usual. It was barely four.

I went to my apartment and lay down on the bed among Tasha, Crystal, and Tess, the three cats I inherited from a high-school friend who'd gone to L.A. to become a bigger star than Marilyn Monroe. I read a couple of chapters of a new Peter Rabe paperback and drifted off to sleep.

The judge called half an hour later and said, with boozy disdain, "You were the one who was foiled, McCain."

"Huh?"

"There's a mechanic at the City Service station who told Cliffie that Rick Drew brought his car in late in the afternoon the day of his death and had a new brake hose put in."

"He'd found the leak?"

"Obviously. And he had a new hose installed."

"Then somebody cut it again *after* he had it fixed."

"My God, McCain. Is the sun frying your brain? Of course somebody cut it after he had it fixed. Now you go find out who it was."

Amy Drew was sitting on the front porch. Though the day was dying, long shadows and lonely moping dogs, the heat was still in the low eighties. Sitting in her rocking chair in her faded housedress and black oxfords, cooling herself with a paper fan from a funeral home, she time-jumped me back to the forties. Even the big calico, Henry, looked like a forties cat somehow.

"Emma's asleep, Mr. McCain."

"That's all right. You could answer my question, too."

"What question would that be, Mr. McCain?"

"Did Rick tell you that somebody had cut his brake hose?"

She kept fanning herself, rocking, thinking. "No; and I'm sure he didn't tell Emma, either. She would've said something to me. Why?"

"Well, he knew it'd been cut. He had it fixed. But it's odd he didn't say anything to anybody."

"Not even Rita? And if he had it fixed, why did his brakes give out on him?"

"Believe it or not, somebody cut them a second time."

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"I wish I could help you, Mr. McCain." Then, "Say, what's that in your hand?"

"Oh, I almost forgot. I wasn't sure whether you'd want this or not. At least right now. A photo taken before Rick crashed."

She took it, looked at it. And shrank. You might think it's illusion when you see this but it's not. In times of grief, people sigh and literally shrink into themselves. They have been diminished physically, mentally, and spiritually.

"I won't show this to Emma for a long time, Mr. McCain. But I do appreciate it."

"Well, if you think of anything, please call me."

"I'll be sure to, Mr. McCain. I'll be sure to."

I had started toward the front steps when she said, "Kind've funny about those girls."

I turned back to her. "Which girls?"

"Rita and Evvie. They were s'posed to hate each other so much. But they were standin' out by Rick's car in the driveway while he was gettin' ready for his race."

"Rita and Evvie? Are you sure?"

"They ran off soon as they seen me. And it was dark by then. But I'm sure it was them. Absolutely."

The kind of novels I like to read usually end up with shoot-outs in seedy dives. This one ended up in a booth at the Rexall Drug Store, which was the favorite malt shop for older teens.

I got myself a raspberry soda and a fresh pack of Luckies and drifted back to the six booths. A radio played a McGuire Sisters sob song. The air conditioning was icy; a million drugstore scents pleasantly accosted me.

I sat down without being asked.

"Let's pretend he's not here," Evvie said.

"Who's not here?" Rita said, picking up the gag.

"Sort've funny, you two together."

"We owe it to Rick," Evvie said. "All the stuff we used to fight about seems pretty petty now."

"Anyway, we don't want company," Rita said. "So we'd appreciate it if you'd leave."

"Amy Drew saw you the other night."

"So?" Evvie said.

"So that wasn't smart. Anybody who saw you together would remember it because you two were supposed to hate each other so much."

They looked at each other. Their silence spoke to caution, uncertainty.

I spoke to Evvie. She seemed the more emotional of the two.

"He's been playing you two off each other since seventh grade.

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The heartbreaker. And he was just about ready to play you off each other again. This time he was going back to you, Evvie. Marv knew it and cut the brake hose. But Rick found out and got it fixed again. I imagine he was going to wait until after the race and then surprise Marv by telling him about getting the hose fixed. But he did tell our friend Rita here, and then she realized that Marv wouldn't have done that unless he knew Rick was going after you again. So Rita gets smart, calls you, and you, Evvie, agree that it's time for the heartbreaker to go. You two sneak over, cut the brake hose, and then stage the big fight out at the drag race so everybody'll think you still hate each other."

"I need to go to the bathroom," Rita said.

"If you do, I'll handcuff you."

"You're not a cop."

"No, but I work for the judge, which makes me an agent for the law." I had no special authority, but it's an assertion that always seems to work. I guess I should also mention that I didn't have any handcuffs with me, either.

"You can't prove any of this," Evvie said.

"Of course I can. Everything you did was stupid."

Rita said, "I want to call my parents."

"You don't need to."

"Why not?"

I nodded to the man just now stepping out from a large display of batteries endorsed by a life-size cut-out of George Gobel. I'd called him twenty minutes ago.

"Oh, Daddy!" Rita said.

I was wrong. She was the more emotional one. She broke and broke badly. Tom Evans came over and helped her out of the booth and held her as he must have when she was a little girl.

Half an hour later, I was home enjoying *Cheyenne* and drinking a Pepsi and smoking a Lucky. Tasha was in my lap, Crystal and Tess were on opposite arms of the easy chair.

The expected call came during a commercial break. "He was right? Cliffie was right?" the judge said.

"He was only half right. He figured it was Rita but he had the reason wrong. And he didn't have any idea that Evvie was her accomplice."

"Well, I guess that's some compensation, him being only half right." Then, "Those poor girls and their families."

"Same for Rick's poor aunts," I said. "And maybe even for poor old Rick himself."

I went back to *Cheyenne*. Judge Anne Esme Whitney probably went back to doing something a lot more sophisticated than that. ●

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BY RAYMOND STEIBER

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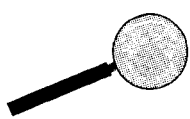

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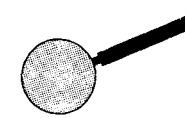

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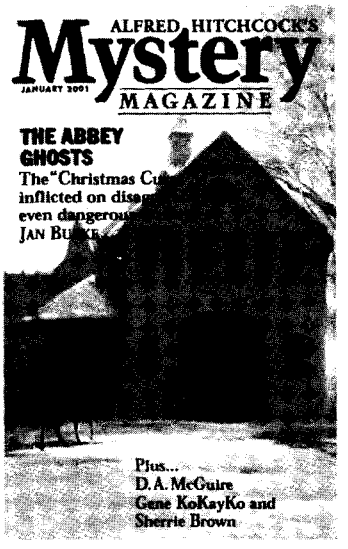

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